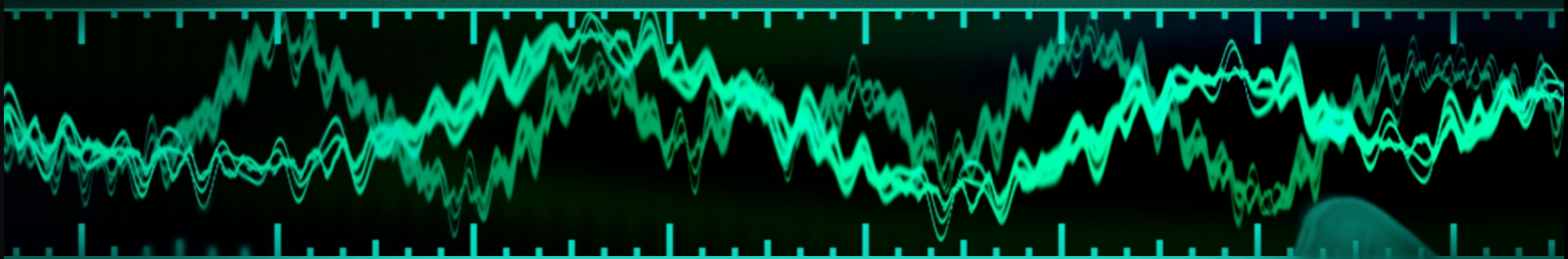
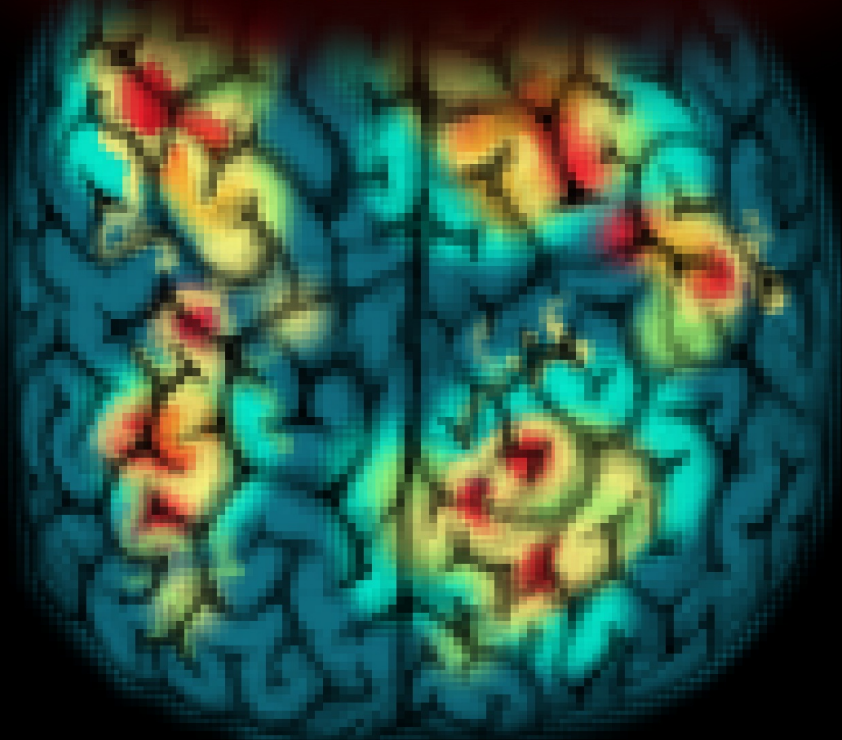


WE MUST **BOOST** *THE* **SIGNAL**



WRITTEN BY: DR. FAUSTUS
ILLUSTRATED BY: EROSARTS

License and other notices

Description

The comic book that follows, together with its script as an appendix, is We Must Boost the Signal ("Signal"), an ero-horror graphic novelette. It was originally published in serial form at EroticMadScience.com in 2015.

Signal was written and commissioned by Iago Faustus, Ph.D. (a pseudonym) and illustrated by Lon Ryden.

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Questions about the license and requests for waivers of the license's conditions may be directed to Dr. Faustus. He can be reached at faustus@eroticmadscience.com.

The Creators

Iago Faustus is a former academic employed in the private sector. He runs the website EroticMadScience.com, where the Tales and a large variety of other material related to the trope of mad science are published. He also publishes a philosophy blog at Pyrosophy and images blogs at Hedonix and Infernal Wonders.

Lon Ryden is a professional artist. He has a website for his art at erosarts.net and also publishes his work on DeviantArt at erosarts.deviantart.com.

Adult Content Notice

The Work is not appropriate for minors. We are utterly unapologetic about the fact that throughout the Work explicit and bizarre situations are intertwined with outlandish philosophical conceits. We feel obliged to request, however, that if you are not of legal age to view such material, or if you reside in a jurisdiction that makes such material unlawful to own or view, that you not read, copy, or transmit the Work. Thank you!

I LOVE GETTING
UP BEFORE
EVERYONE ELSE.



EVERYTHING IS SO PEACEFUL AND QUIET,
AND I HAVE THE WORLD TO MYSELF.



I CAN GET OUT
FOR A SWIM ON
A BEAUTIFUL
SUMMER
MORNING.



HUH. GETTING A
LITTLE *BIG* HERE.

WE MUST BOOST THE SIGNAL



WRITTEN BY: DR. FAUSTUS
ILLUSTRATED BY: EROSARTS



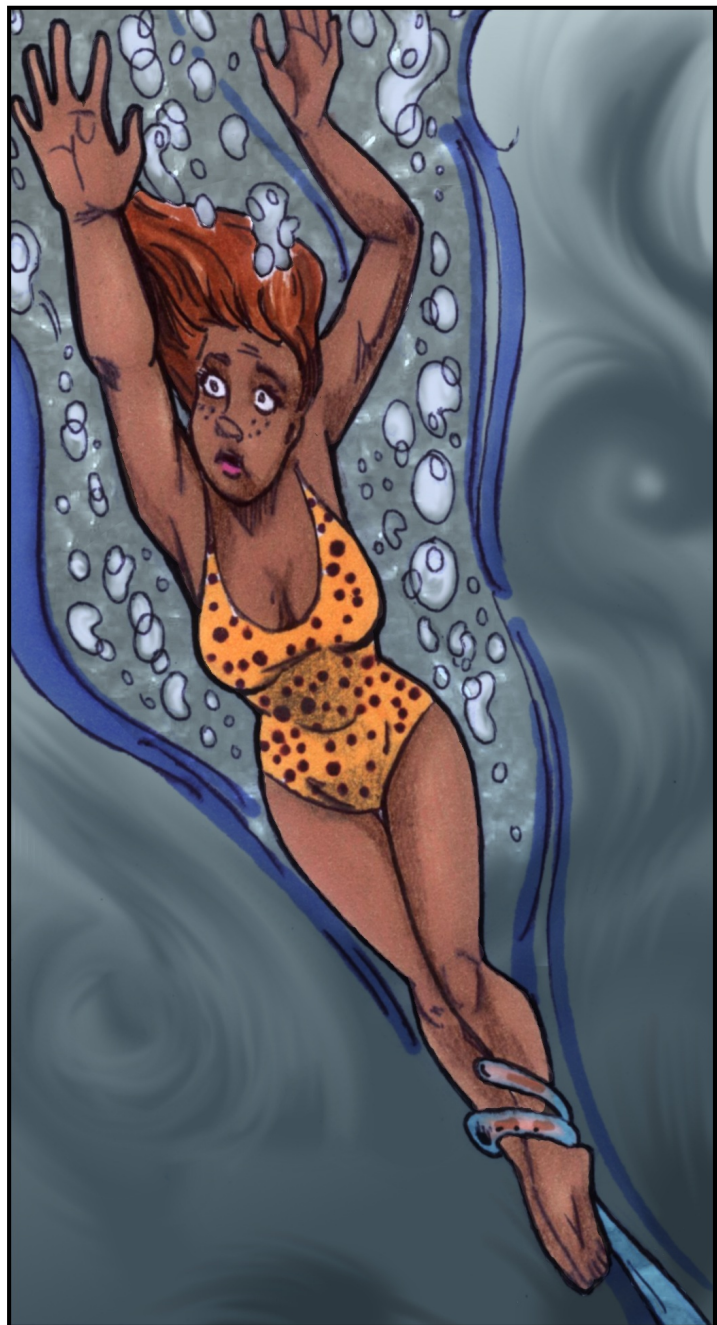
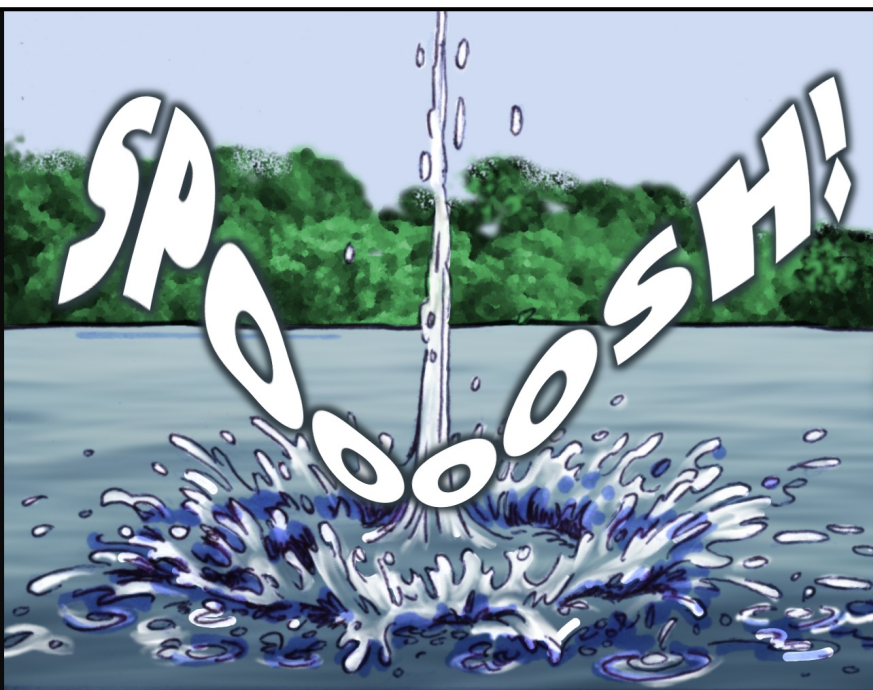
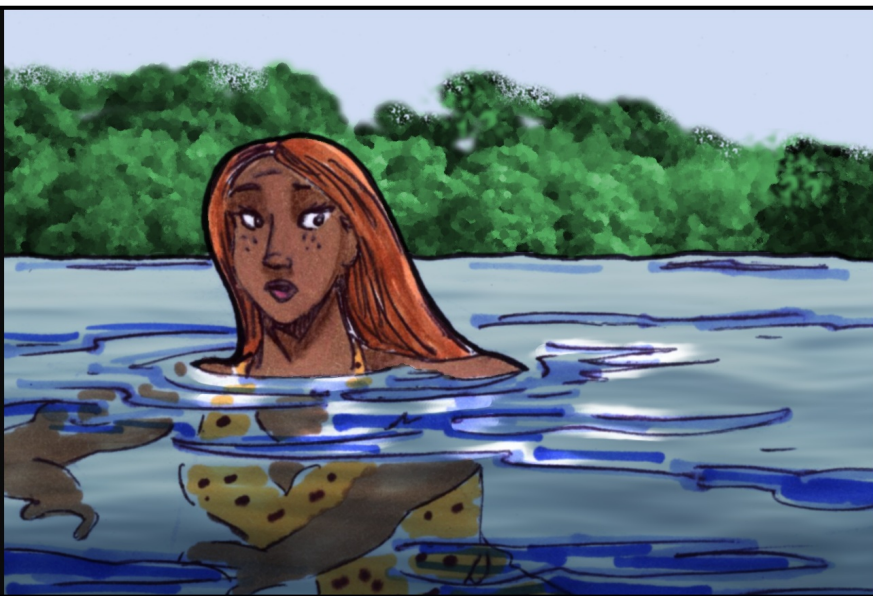
SPLASH!



THE WATER IS
UNUSUALLY **WARM**
THIS MORNING...



ALL'S RIGHT WITH
THE WORLD.

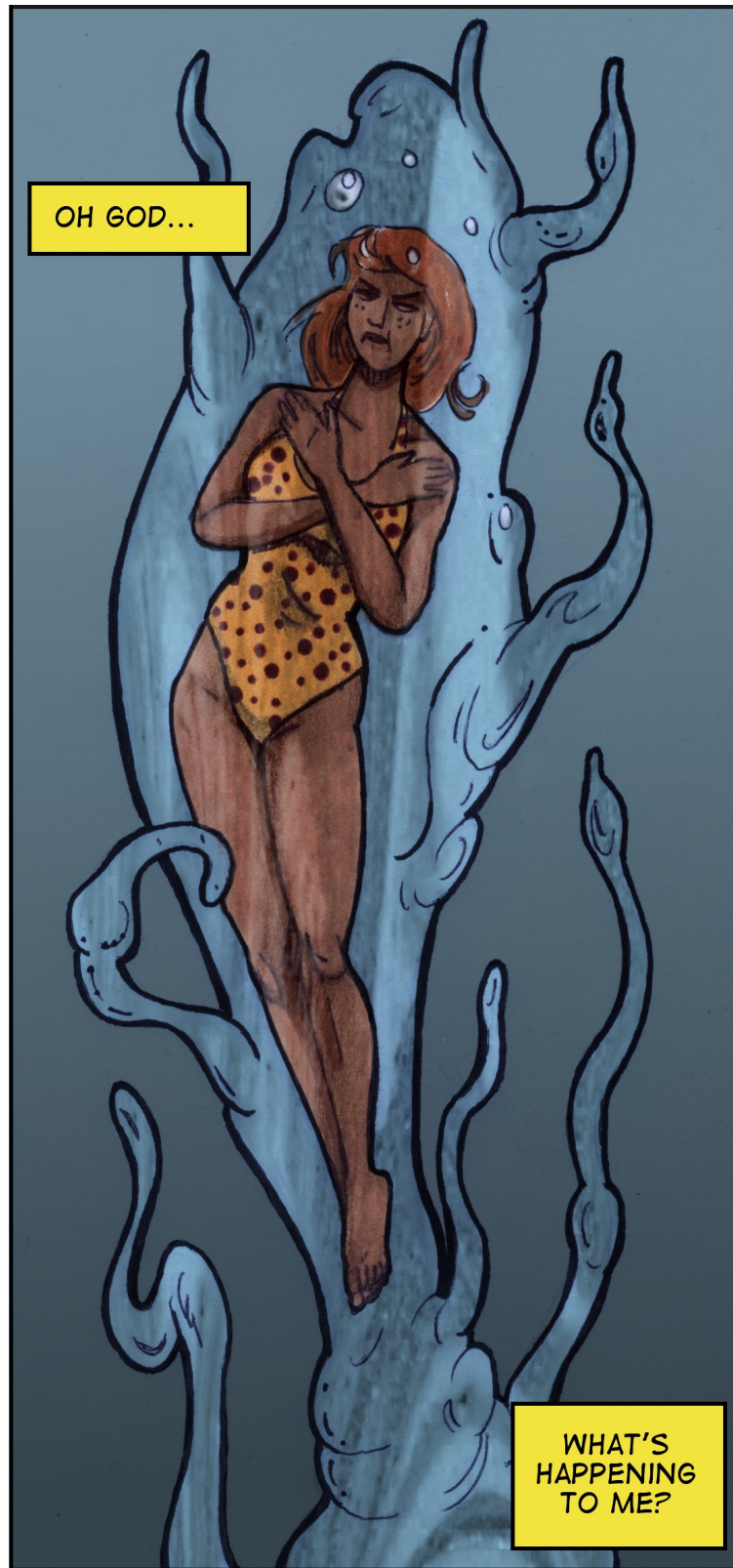




NO!

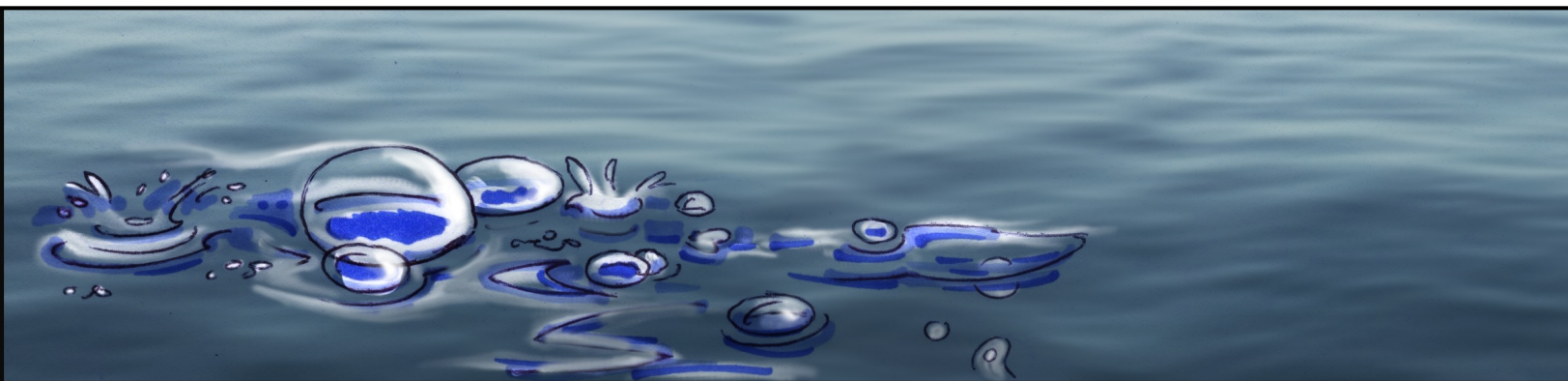


PLEASE...



OH GOD...

WHAT'S
HAPPENING
TO ME?



MUST...

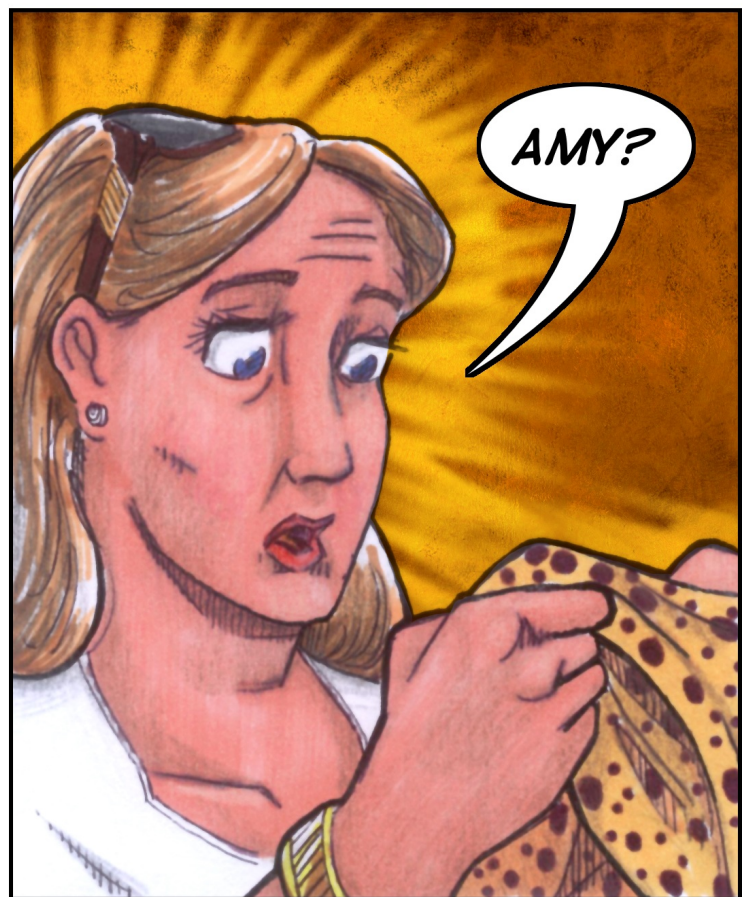
LOOK...

OH NO!

AND YET I...

...I DON'T FEEL
ANY PAIN....

I FEEL
SO WARM.





YOU DRAGGED
THE LAKE RIGHT AWAY,
SHERIFF JACKSON?

THE NINENGERS
HAVE BEEN COMING
UP FOR SUMMERS AT
THEIR LODGE AT THE LAKE
FOR YEARS. SOLID PEOPLE.
AMY NININGER WAS A
WELL BROUGHT-UP
YOUNG LADY.



SPECIAL AGENT MACNEIL,
THIS IS BOB GLIMMERBECK, OUR
COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER.

DR. GLIMMERBECK.

SPECIAL
AGENT.

NOT THE
SORT TO GET
HERSELF INTO
TROUBLE, SO
GIVEN THE FACTS
OF THE CASE, WE
EXPEDITED THE
INVESTIGATION.



SHOW SPECIAL
AGENT MACNEIL WHAT
WE FOUND, BOB.

SURE THING,
SHERIFF.

JESUS...



THIS IS WHAT WE FOUND, AGENT MACNEIL. THE BONE IS **CLEAN**, NO SOFT OR CONNECTIVE TISSUE OR EVEN MARROW.



BUT HOW DO YOU...

DNA IN THE BONE CELLS ITSELF, AND ALSO THE FAMILY DENTIST IDENTIFIED SOME WORK IN THE TEETH.

NO SIGNS OF EITHER ANIMAL ACTIVITY OR TOOL-WORK ON THE BONES.

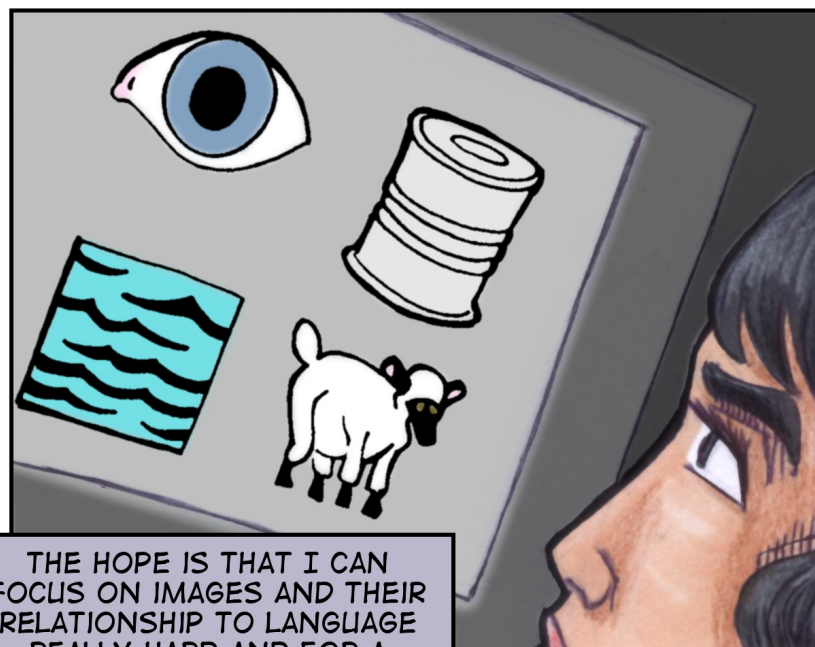


IT'S LIKE AMY NININGER JUST **DISSOLVED**.

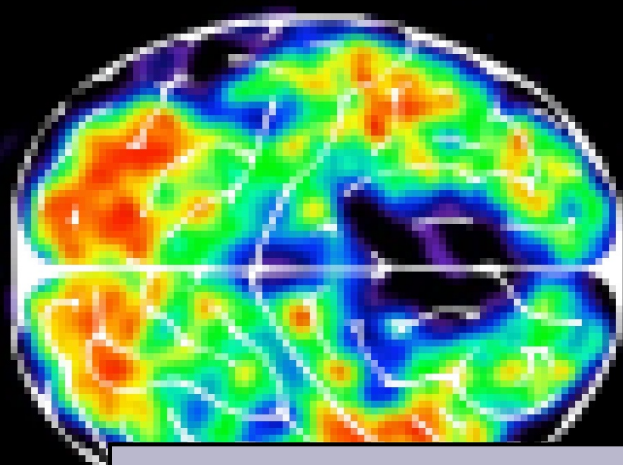
THERE MIGHT HAVE BEEN MORE TEDIOUS THINGS DONE FOR THE SAKE OF SCIENCE THAN WHAT I'M DOING NOW.



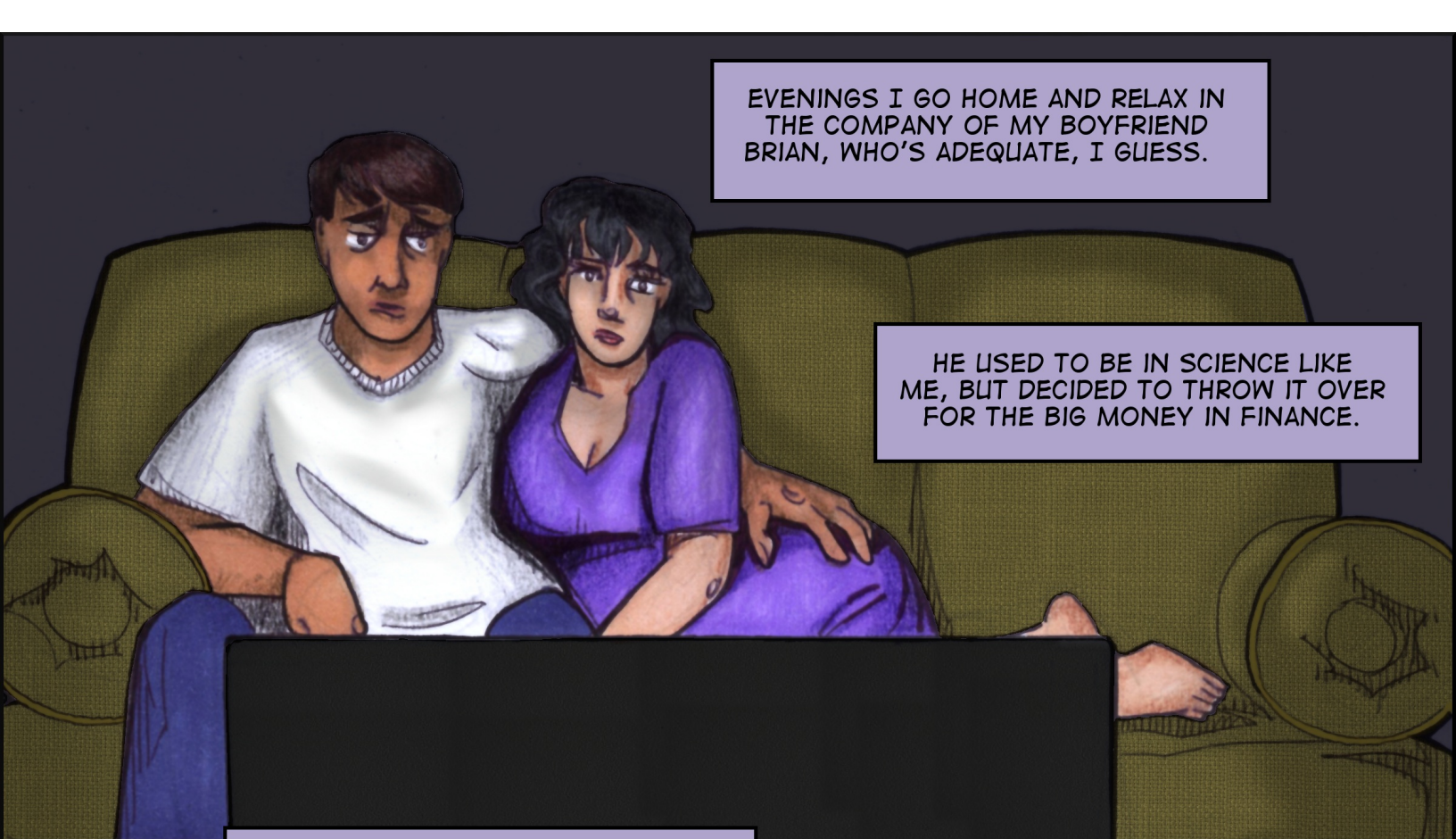
SOMETHING HAVING TO DO WITH THE CLASSIFICATION OF BEETLES, MAYBE.



THE HOPE IS THAT I CAN FOCUS ON IMAGES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO LANGUAGE REALLY HARD AND FOR A REALLY LONG TIME.





THE HOPE IS THAT EVENTUALLY WE WILL HAVE A COMPREHENSIVE MAPPING BETWEEN CONCEPTS IN MY MIND AND ACTIVITY IN MY BRAIN.

A man and a woman are sitting on a green couch. The man is on the left, wearing a white t-shirt and blue pants, looking slightly to the right with a concerned expression. The woman is on the right, wearing a purple dress, looking towards the man. A large black rectangular box obscures the lower half of the image.

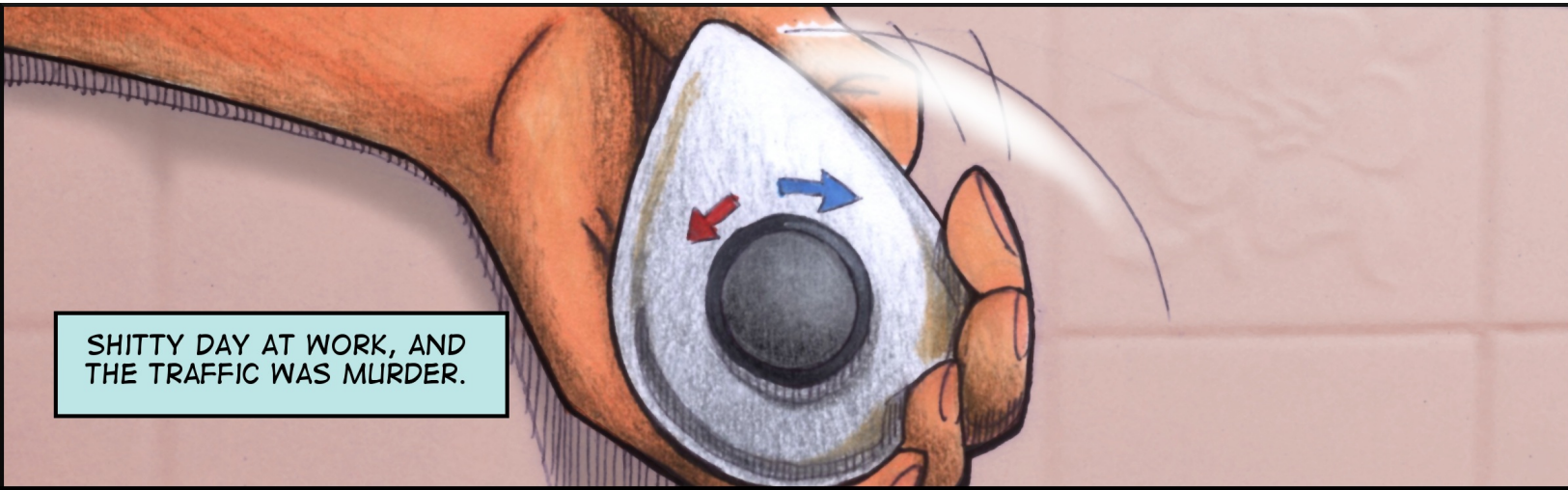
EVENINGS I GO HOME AND RELAX IN
THE COMPANY OF MY BOYFRIEND
BRIAN, WHO'S ADEQUATE, I GUESS.

HE USED TO BE IN SCIENCE LIKE
ME, BUT DECIDED TO THROW IT OVER
FOR THE BIG MONEY IN FINANCE.

I'M BEGINNING TO SUSPECT
THAT HE WANTS ME TO BECOME
THE NICE WIFE THAT WILL GO ALONG
WITH HIS NICE CAREER.

A close-up of the man's face. He is resting his head on his hand, looking down with a thoughtful or perhaps skeptical expression.A close-up of the woman's face as she sits at a desk, typing on a laptop. She has a focused expression.

I NAIVELY CONTINUE TO THINK THAT
THERE'S SOME GREAT ADVENTURE
TO BE HAD IN SCIENCE, THOUGH.



SHITTY DAY AT WORK, AND
THE TRAFFIC WAS MURDER.



A NICE
HOT SHOWER
WILL DO ME
GOOD.



AND THEN I GUESS
I'LL CURL UP WITH A BOOK
AND FALL ASLEEP.



ALONE, AS
SO OFTEN.



ICK! WHAT
THE... ?



NO!!



**SOMEBODY
PLEASE HELP ME!**

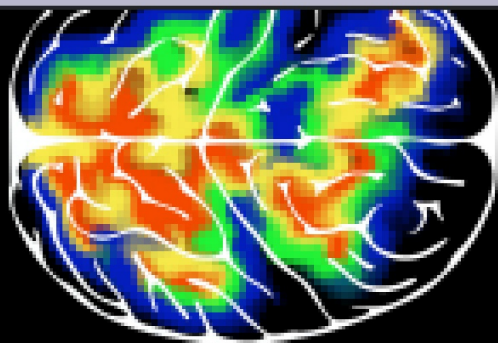


CAN I REALLY BE
SO SCREWED?

AFTER SEVERAL MONTHS DURING WHICH I THOUGHT MY EYEBALLS MIGHT START TO BLEED WE ARE FINALLY MAKING PROGRESS.

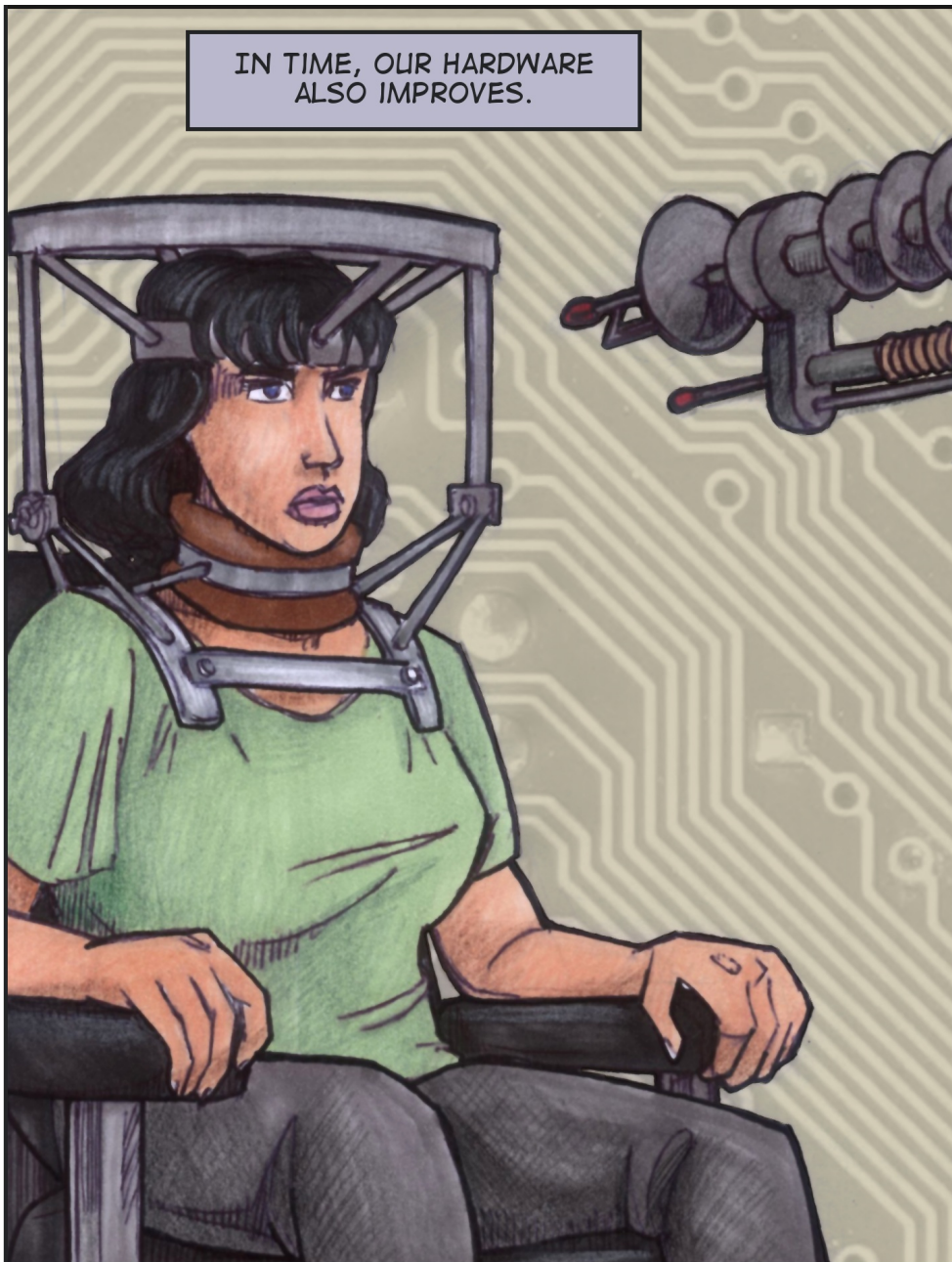


OUR SOFTWARE HAS FINALLY LEARNED ENOUGH TO START TURNING NEURAL PATTERNS INTO CONCEPTS AND SYNTAX.



IN THE BLUE VALLEY THERE ARE ANIMALS YOU CAN EAT. IN THE GREEN VALLEY THERE ARE ANIMALS THAT CAN EAT YOU.

IN TIME, OUR HARDWARE ALSO IMPROVES.



DREAMS OF TELEPATHY HAVE COME TRUE, AT LEAST FOR ONE WOMAN SCIENTIST.

OUR TEAM HEADS ARE IN NOBEL PRIZE TERRITORY HERE. THOUGH I'M NOT. TOO JUNIOR. ALSO TOO FEMALE.



AND SO THE
PAINTER SAID "LENIN?
LENIN'S IN POLAND!"



OH, HA HA.
SAW THAT PUNCHLINE
COMING KIND OF A
LONG WAY AWAY.

THOUGH I'LL
CONCEDE THAT
APPROACHING SOVIET
POLITICAL HISTORY
THROUGH JOKES IS
AN AUDACIOUS
APPROACH.



OH, YUCK!
WHAT IS THAT?



PROBABLY JUST
SOME DAMN BIRD. HERE,
LET ME HELP YOU.

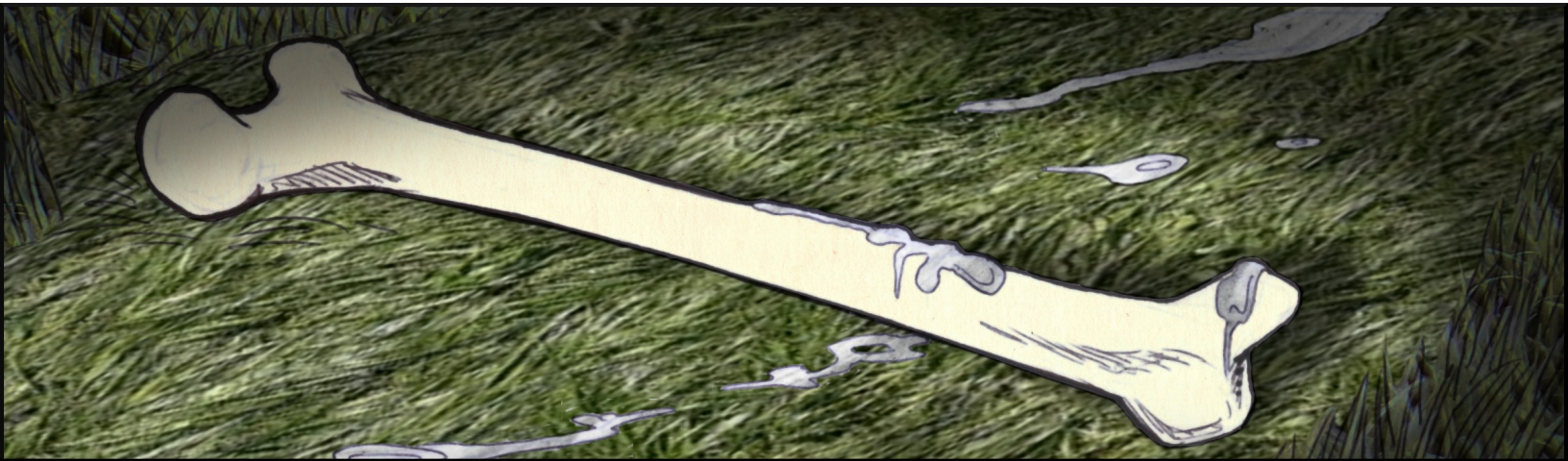
STANLEY, I
DON'T THINK THAT WAS
JUST A BIRD...

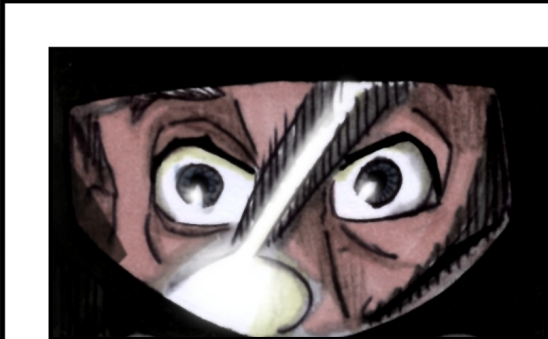


EEEEEEEE

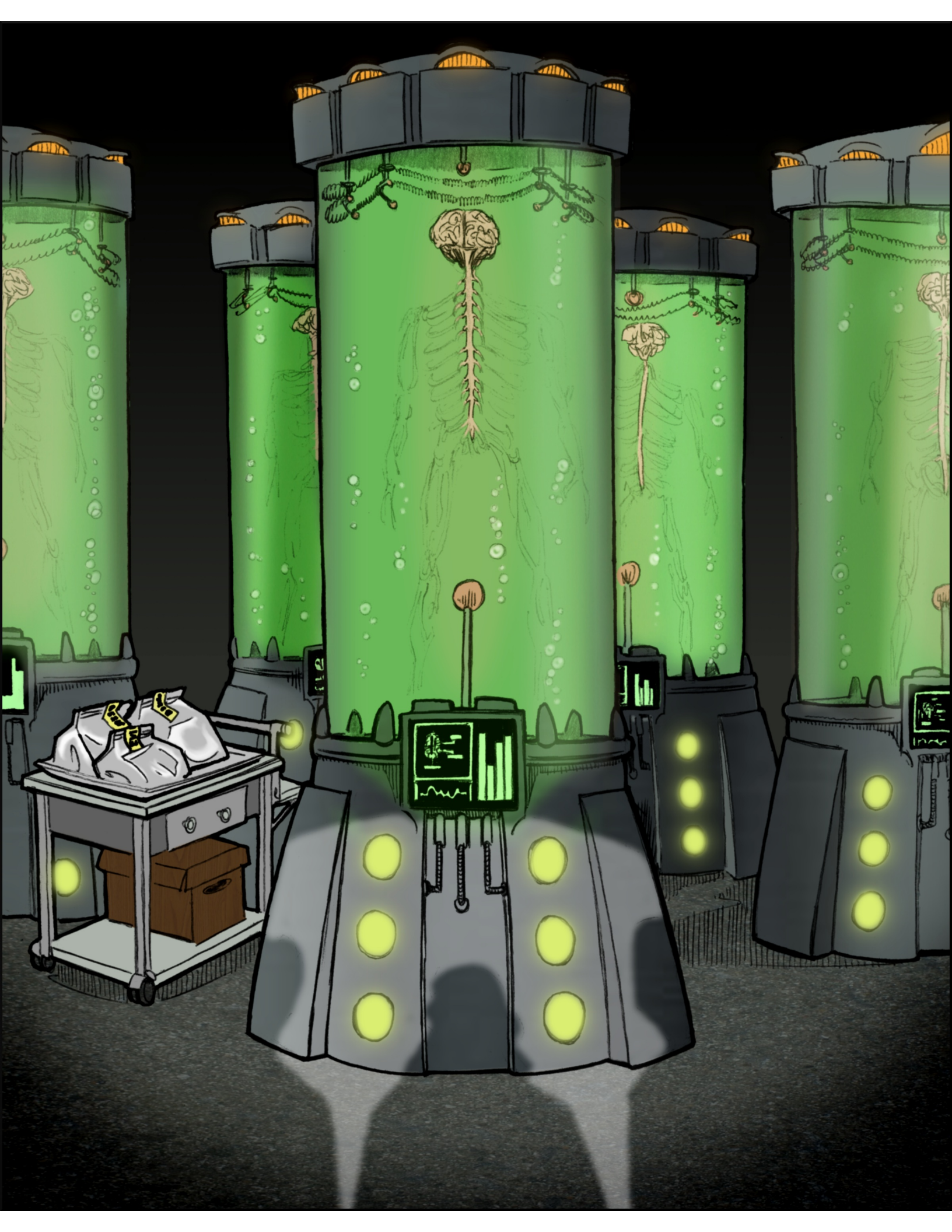




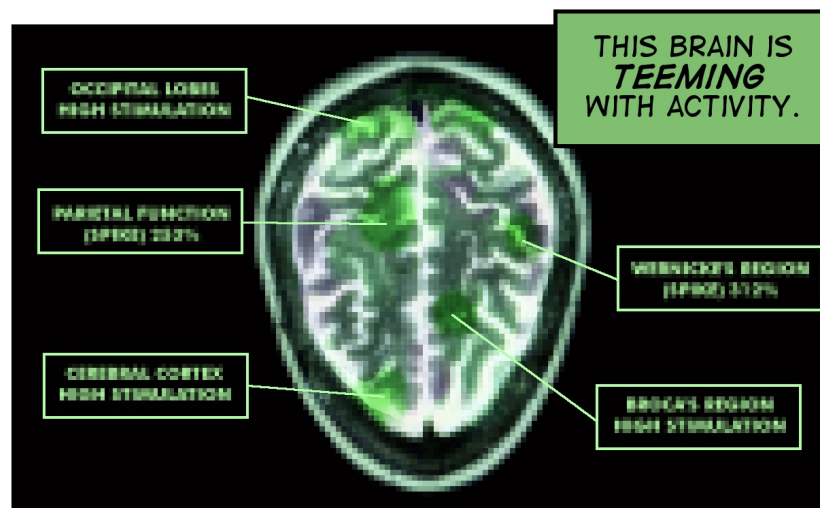
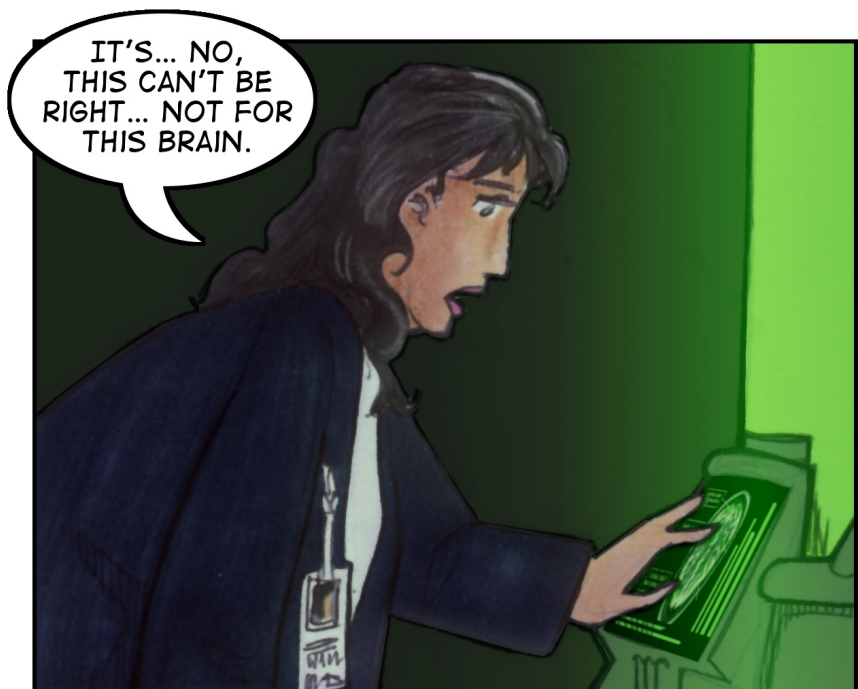















THAT'S RIGHT,
DR. MONTCLAIR.
THESE BRAINS
ARE ALIVE.


BUT...

HOW?




THE GEL IN WHICH THESE
BRAINS ARE SUSPENDED
APPEARS TO BE SOME
SORT OF **SYMBIOTIC
ORGANISM**. IT PROVIDES
NUTRITION AND RESPIR-
ATION TO THE TISSUES.

IT ALSO APPEARS
TO BE ENGAGED
IN A DENSE
PATTERN OF
ELECTROCHEMICAL
INTERACTIONS
WITH THEM.



A BIOTERRORISM
RESPONSE TEAM FOUND
THESE FIVE SPECIMENS IN
A SEWER SOMEWHERE IN
THE MIDDLE WEST. THEY
WERE ABLE TO RETRIEVE
THEM AND BRING
THEM BACK FOR
STUDY.



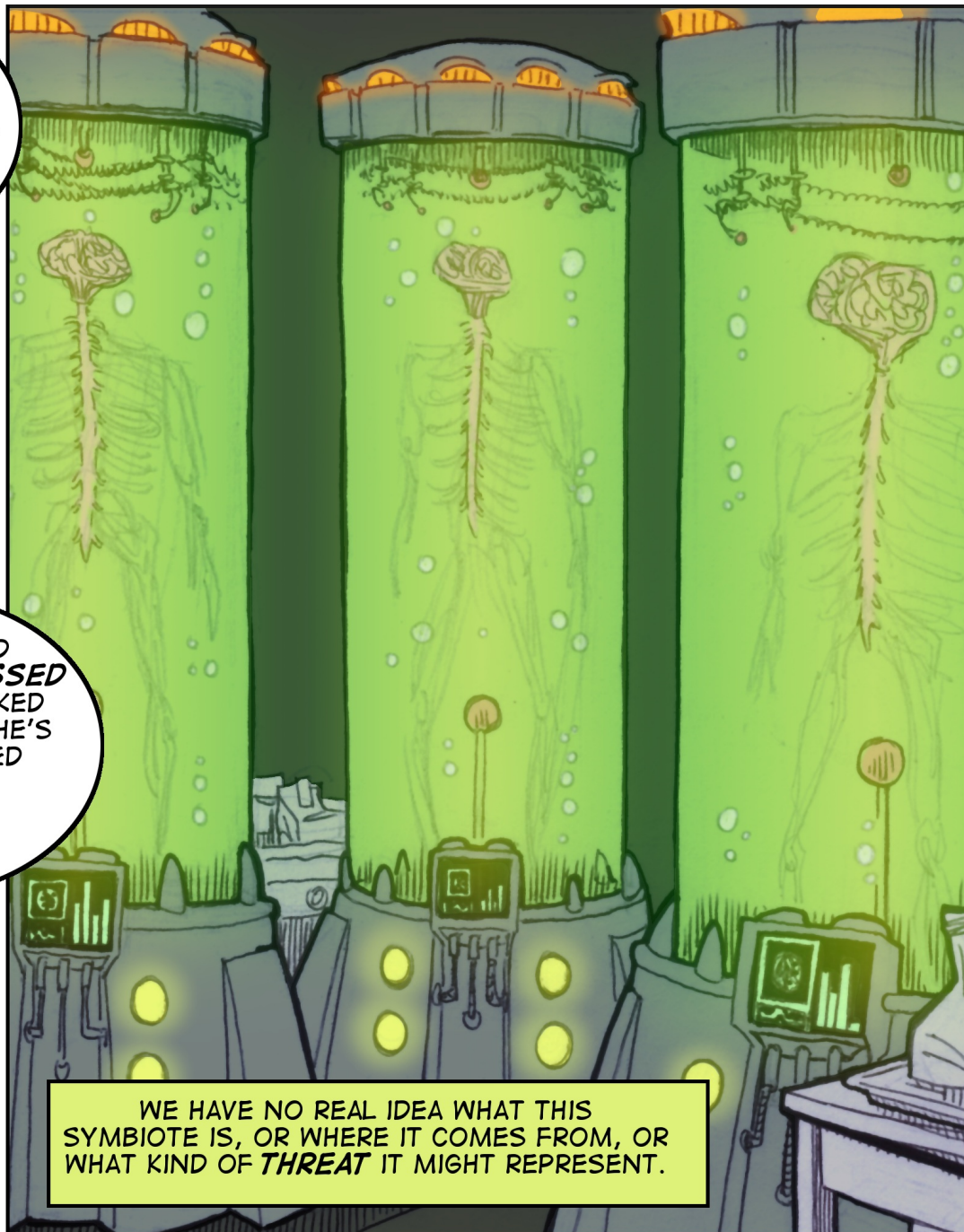
WE THINK
WE KNOW THE
IDENTITIES OF
THREE OF THEM.
ONE WAS AMY
NININGER, A
TEENAGE GIRL WHO
DISAPPEARED
WHILE SWIMMING...



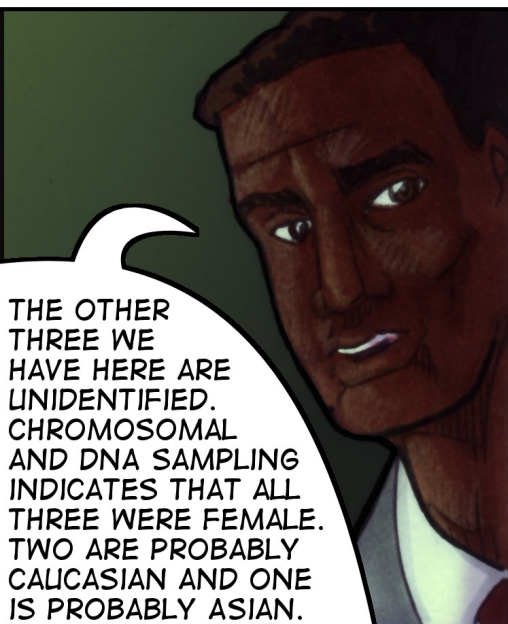
ANOTHER
WAS GRACE
BLUESTONE,
A COLLEGE
STUDENT.



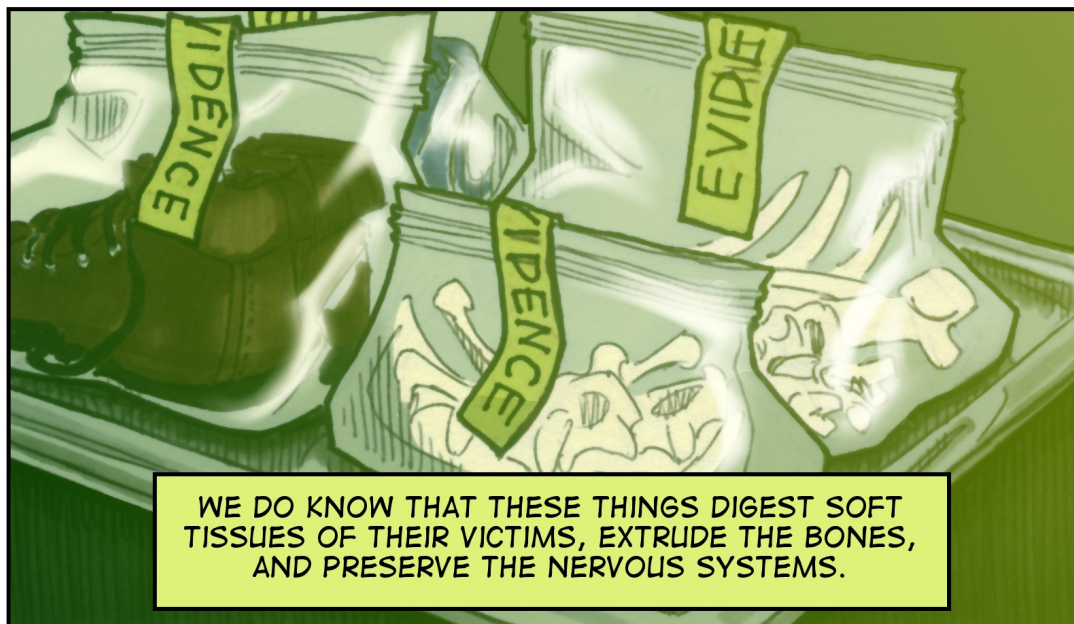
HER BOYFRIEND
ACTUALLY **WITNESSED**
HER BEING ATTACKED
BY A SYMBIOTE. HE'S
UNDER EXTENDED
PSYCHIATRIC
OBSERVATION
NOW...



WE HAVE NO REAL IDEA WHAT THIS
SYMBIOTE IS, OR WHERE IT COMES FROM, OR
WHAT KIND OF **THREAT** IT MIGHT REPRESENT.



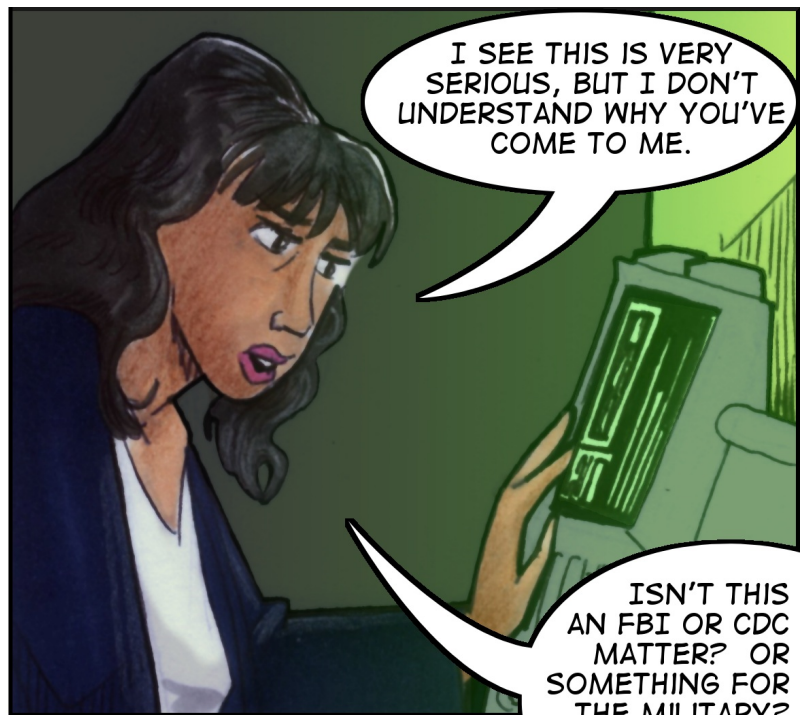
THE OTHER
THREE WE
HAVE HERE ARE
UNIDENTIFIED.
CHROMOSOMAL
AND DNA SAMPLING
INDICATES THAT ALL
THREE WERE FEMALE.
TWO ARE PROBABLY
CALICASIAN AND ONE
IS PROBABLY ASIAN.



WE DO KNOW THAT THESE THINGS DIGEST SOFT
TISSUES OF THEIR VICTIMS, EXTRUDE THE BONES,
AND PRESERVE THE NERVOUS SYSTEMS.

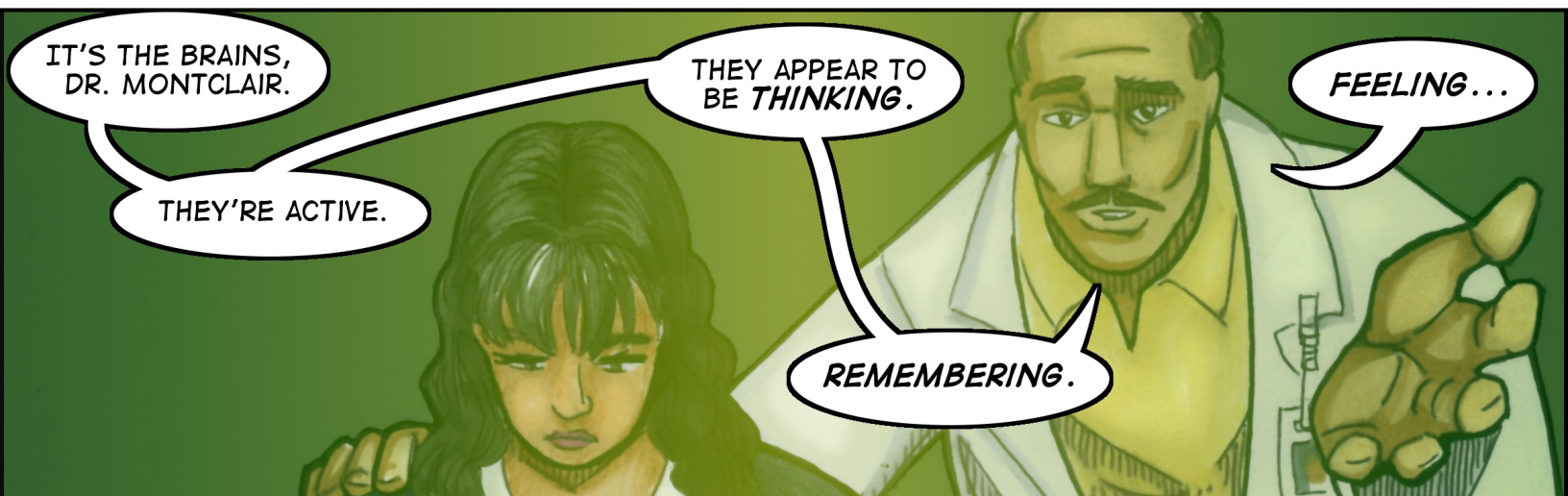


AND WE THINK THAT KNOWING *WHY* WOULD BE THE KEY TO PREVENTING FUTURE ATTACKS. SAVING *LIVES*, DR. MONTCLAIR.



I SEE THIS IS VERY SERIOUS, BUT I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY YOU'VE COME TO ME.

ISN'T THIS AN FBI OR CDC MATTER? OR SOMETHING FOR THE MILITARY?



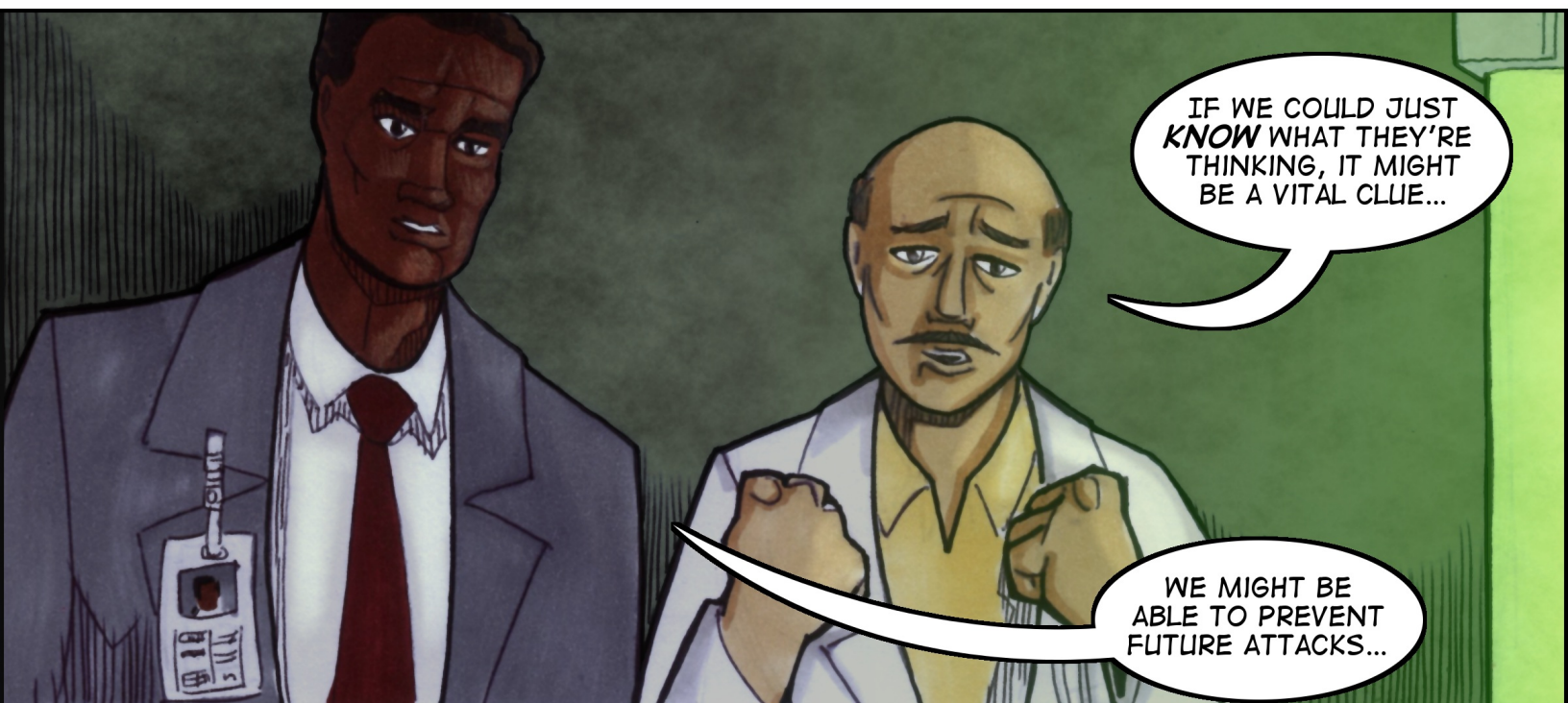
IT'S THE BRAINS, DR. MONTCLAIR.

THEY'RE ACTIVE.

THEY APPEAR TO BE *THINKING*.

REMEMBERING.

FEELING...



IF WE COULD JUST *KNOW* WHAT THEY'RE THINKING, IT MIGHT BE A VITAL CLUE...

WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO PREVENT FUTURE ATTACKS...



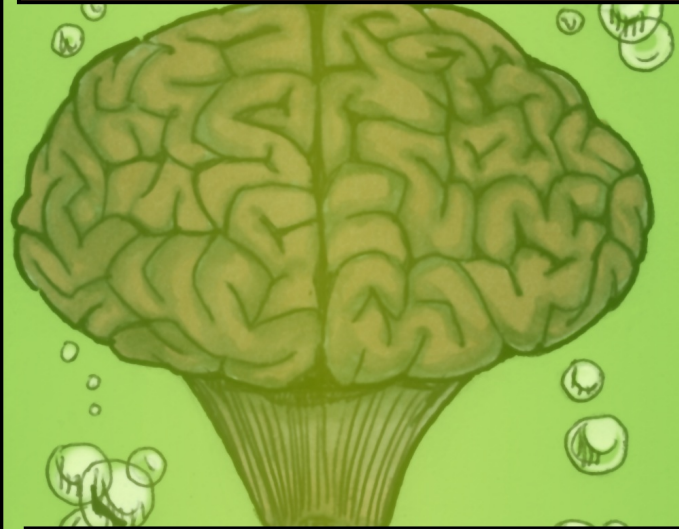
WITH THE BRAIN-SCANNING TECHNOLOGY WHICH YOU HELPED DEVELOP...

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME IT HAPPENED...
I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, MAYBE EIGHT OR NINE.
I WAS RUNNING DOWN A HILL VERY FAST...

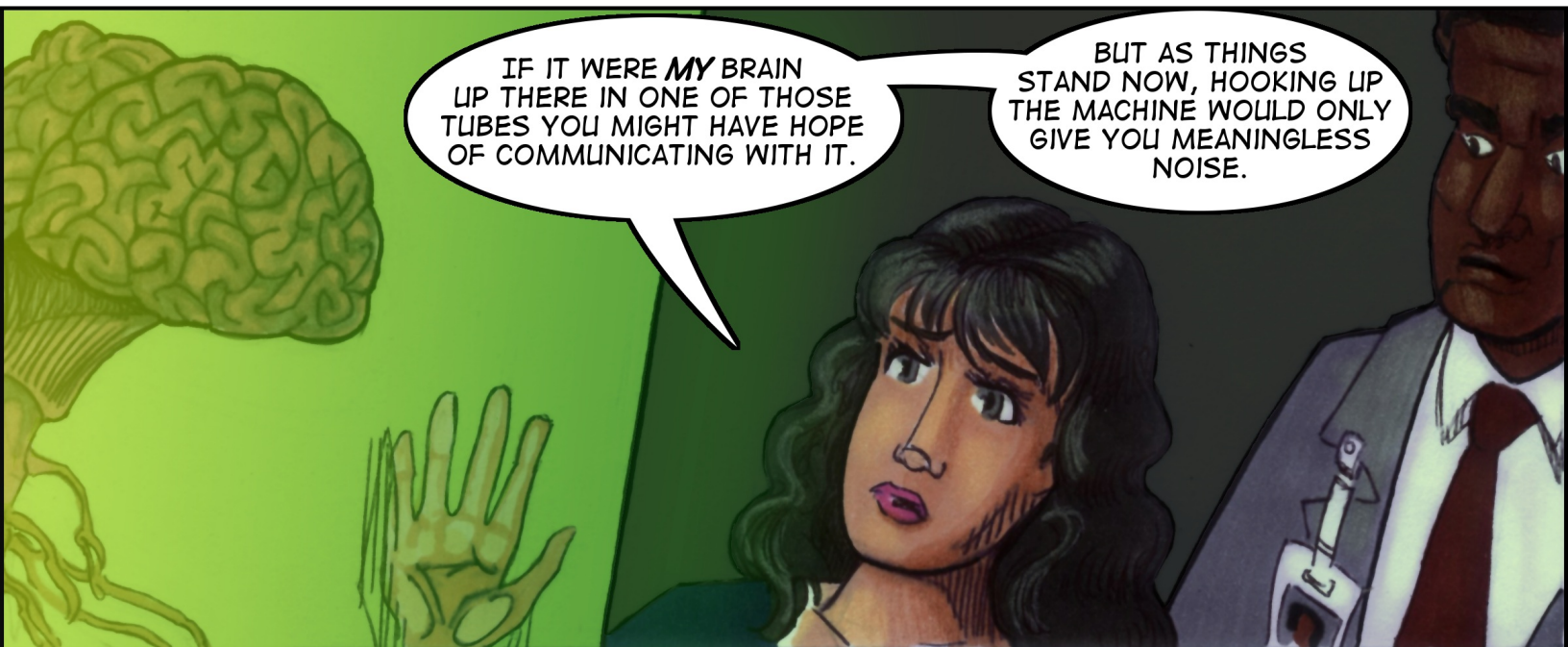


I'M SORRY,
GENTLEMEN, BUT
THE TECHNOLOGY
DOESN'T WORK
THAT WAY.

EACH BRAIN IS UNIQUE. THE
SCANNER ONLY WORKS AFTER A LONG
PROCESS OF TUNING TO A SPECIFIC BRAIN.



AND THAT CAN ONLY BE DONE WITH A
SUBJECT WHO IS ABLE TO COMMUNICATE
USING MORE NORMAL MEANS.



IF IT WERE **MY** BRAIN
UP THERE IN ONE OF THOSE
TUBES YOU MIGHT HAVE HOPE
OF COMMUNICATING WITH IT.

BUT AS THINGS
STAND NOW, HOOKING UP
THE MACHINE WOULD ONLY
GIVE YOU MEANINGLESS
NOISE.

THEY NOD GRAVELY
AT MY EXPLANATION.

SPECIAL AGENT MACNEIL GIVES
ME DOSSIERS OF SOME OF THE
WOMEN TO READ. I SUSPECT A
MOTIVATIONAL PLOY, BUT AGREE
TO READ THEM ANYWAY.



ase: X-989445 Photo 1/3

Amy N
DOB:
Whee
Pare
SS#



IT'S A BIT OF A **SHOCK** TO
LOOK DOWN AT THE SMILING
FACE OF SOMEONE WHOSE
SKULL YOU'VE JUST SEEN.

I READ ALSO ABOUT GRACE
BLUESTONE. EVEN IN THE
BUREAUCRATIC PROSE IT'S
CLEAR THAT THEY WERE ALL
HUMAN BEINGS WITH
LIVES AND FUTURES.



I BEGIN TO FEEL
MOTIVATED.



I SEE.
WELL THEN,
THANK YOU
FOR YOUR
TIME, DR.
MONTCLAIR.

I'LL SEE YOU
THROUGH SECURITY
AND OUT.



IF YOU DO THINK OF
SOMETHING YOU WILL LET US
KNOW, DR. MONTCLAIR? I MEAN,
THOSE POOR GIRLS,
THEIR FAMILIES...

I PROMISE
TO SEE WHAT
I CAN DO.



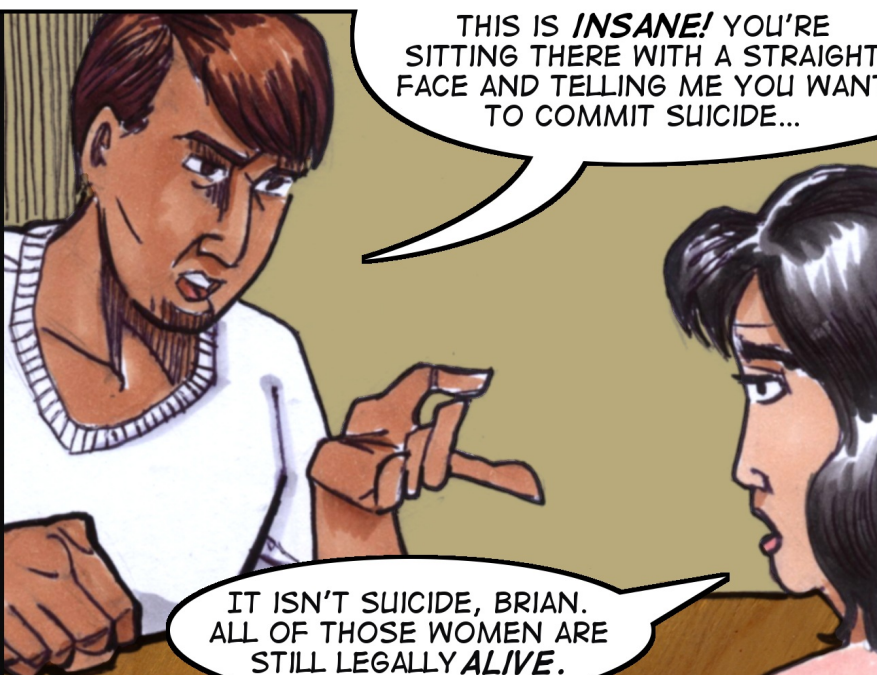
I'VE THOUGHT OF
SOMETHING ALREADY.

I HAVE TO EXPLAIN MY
SOMETHING TO THE BOYFRIEND.



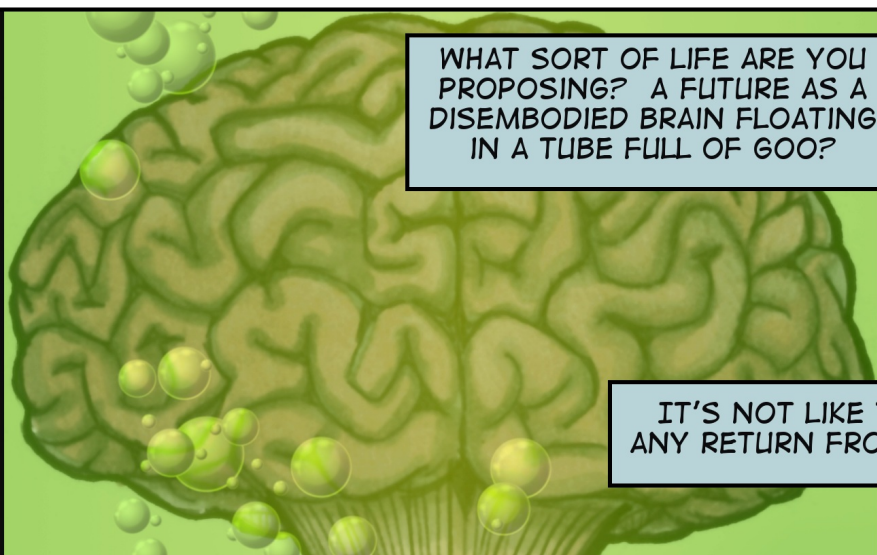
THIS IS *INSANE!* YOU'RE
SITTING THERE WITH A STRAIGHT
FACE AND TELLING ME YOU WANT
TO COMMIT SUICIDE...

IT ISN'T SUICIDE, BRIAN.
ALL OF THOSE WOMEN ARE
STILL LEGALLY *ALIVE*.

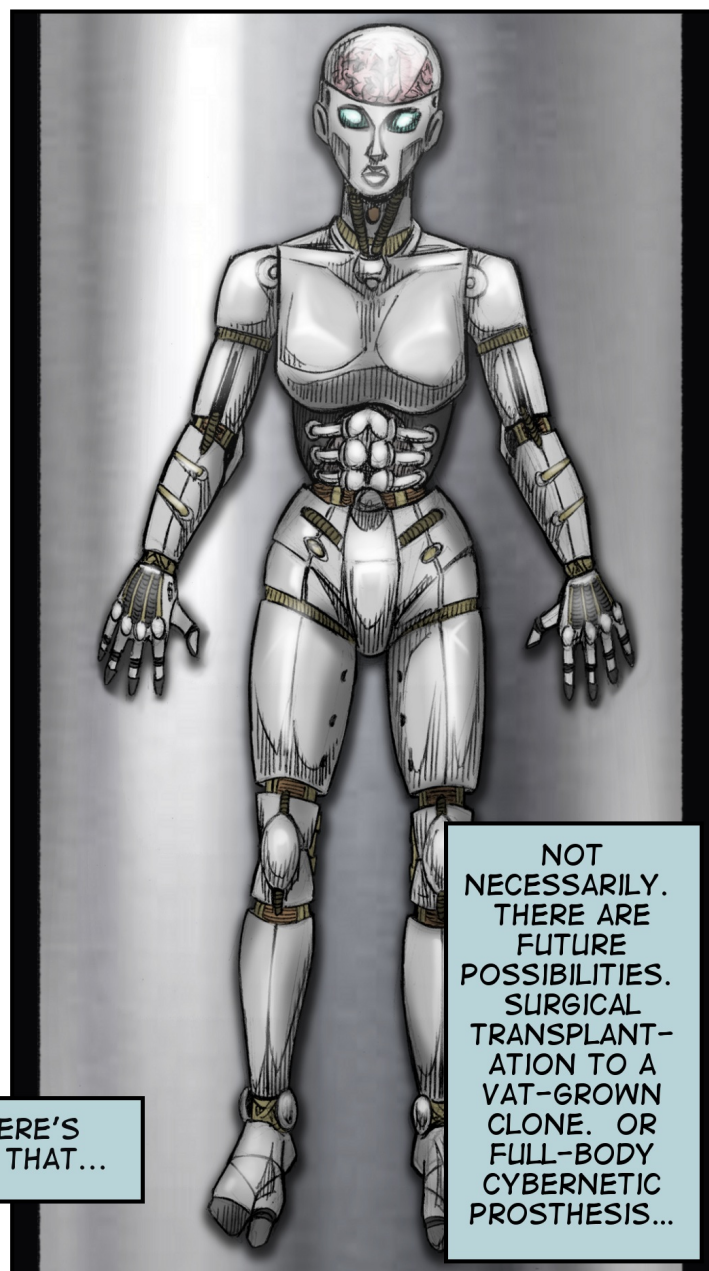


WHAT SORT OF LIFE ARE YOU
PROPOSING? A FUTURE AS A
DISEMBODED BRAIN FLOATING
IN A TUBE FULL OF GOO?

IT'S NOT LIKE THERE'S
ANY RETURN FROM THAT...



NOT
NECESSARILY.
THERE ARE
FUTURE
POSSIBILITIES.
SURGICAL
TRANSPLANT-
ATION TO A
VAT-GROWN
CLONE. OR
FULL-BODY
CYBERNETIC
PROSTHESIS...



THOSE TECHNOLOGIES
ARE *SPECULATIVE*,
DECADES OFF IF
THEY HAPPEN
AT ALL.



YOU'RE TELLING
ME YOU THAT YOU
WANT TO GIVE UP ON
US HAVING A FUTURE
TOGETHER.



I SUPPOSE I AM, BRIAN.



I GUESS I
LOVE SCIENCE
MORE THAN YOU.

IT MUST HURT.
I KNOW. AND
I'M SORRY.

I BEGIN PACKING TO LEAVE,
ALTHOUGH HALFWAY THROUGH
THE UTTER INCONGRUITY OF
DOING SO STRIKES ME.



AFTER ALL, IT'S NOT LIKE
I'LL NEED *CLOTHES* OR
A *TOOTHBRUSH* WHERE
I PROPOSE TO GO.



I DRIVE FOR
A LONG TIME
THINKING.
AM I REALLY
INSANE?

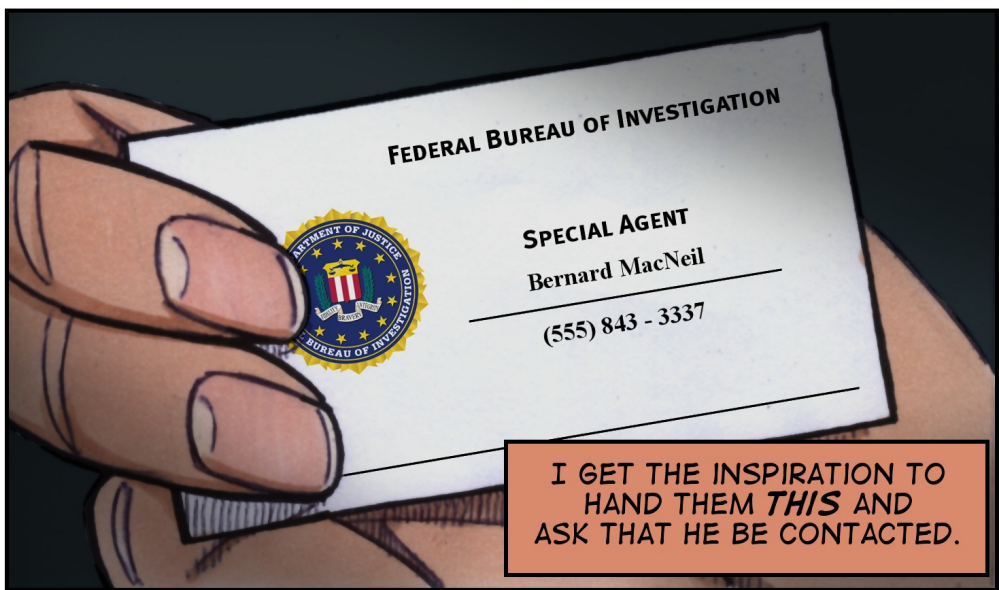


IT MUST HAVE
BEEN HOURS LATER
WHEN I WAS PULLED
OVER BY THE POLICE.



THE NICE COPS POLITELY EXPLAIN
THAT THEY HAVE AN EMERGENCY
CIVIL COMMITMENT ORDER FOR ME.

AND I CAN GUESS WHY,
TOO. FUCK YOU, BRIAN.
THIS IS *MY* DECISION.



FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

SPECIAL AGENT
Bernard MacNeil

(555) 843 - 3337

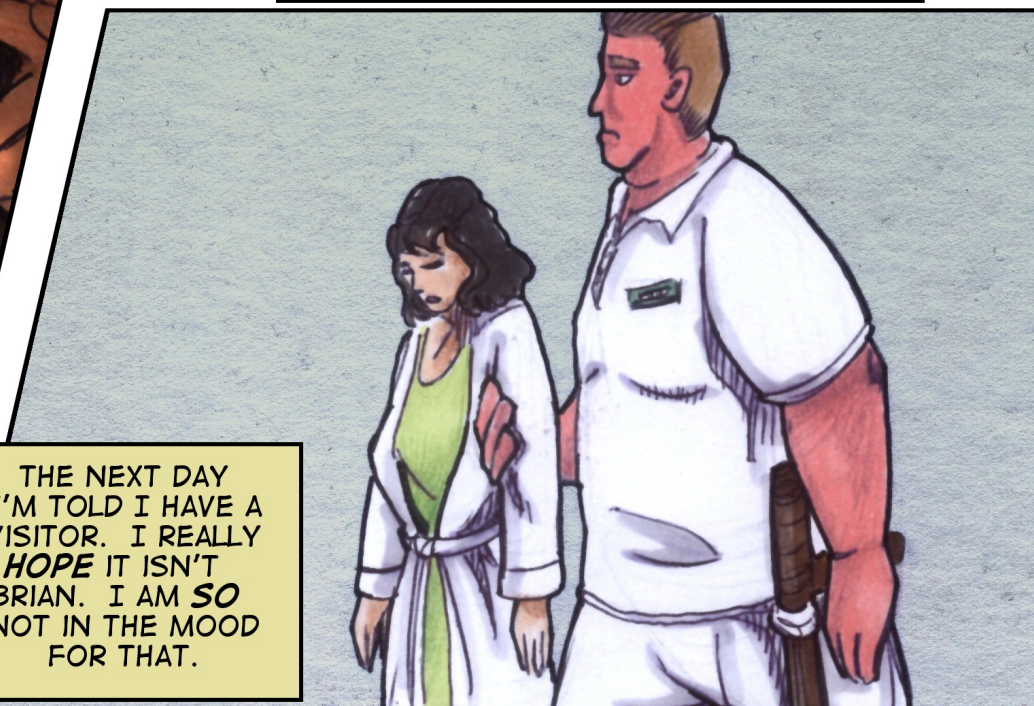
I GET THE INSPIRATION TO
HAND THEM *THIS* AND
ASK THAT HE BE CONTACTED.

THEY'RE SKEPTICAL OF WHAT
MIGHT BE A CRAZY WOMAN.

I ASK THEM WHAT
THEY THINK WILL
HAPPEN IF THEY
KEEP MATERIAL
INFORMATION FROM
A FEDERAL OFFICIAL.



I HAVE TO BE MEDICATED AND
WAIT FOR QUITE A WHILE UNDER
OBSERVATION, A PROFOUND INDIGNITY.



THE NEXT DAY
I'M TOLD I HAVE A
VISITOR. I REALLY
HOPE IT ISN'T
BRIAN. I AM **SO**
NOT IN THE MOOD
FOR THAT.



PRAISE
YOG-SOTHOTH.



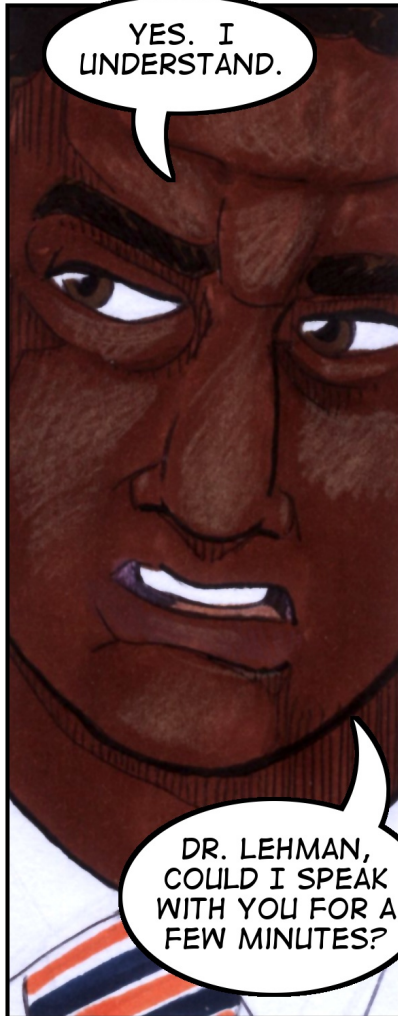
DR. MONTCLAIR.
I CAME AS SOON AS I
GOT THE CALL FROM THE
STATE POLICE.

THANK YOU, SPECIAL
AGENT MACNEIL.

I THINK I HAVE THOUGHT
OF A WAY TO HELP YOU
WITH YOUR... LABORATORY
ISSUE. I UNDERSTAND OF
COURSE THAT YOU WANT
IT KEPT **CONFIDENTIAL**...



YES. I
UNDERSTAND.



DR. LEHMAN,
COULD I SPEAK
WITH YOU FOR A
FEW MINUTES?

THIS PATIENT, SPECIAL AGENT, IS SUSPECTED OF
BEING DELUSIONAL AND HAVING **SUICIDAL** TEN-
DENCIES. I AM **NOT** LETTING HER OUT OF MY
CARE. AND I **CAN** CALL THE DIRECTOR OF THIS
INSTITUTION AND HAVE YOU REMOVED...



AND I **CAN**
CALL THE UNITED
STATES ATTORNEY
AND HAVE YOU
ARRESTED FOR
OBSTRUCTING A
FEDERAL
INVESTIGATION...



I WATCH THE TWO MEN MUTTERING ANGRILY IN LOW TONES FOR SOME TIME AS EACH PRETENDS TO BE MY DEFENDER AND PROTECTOR.

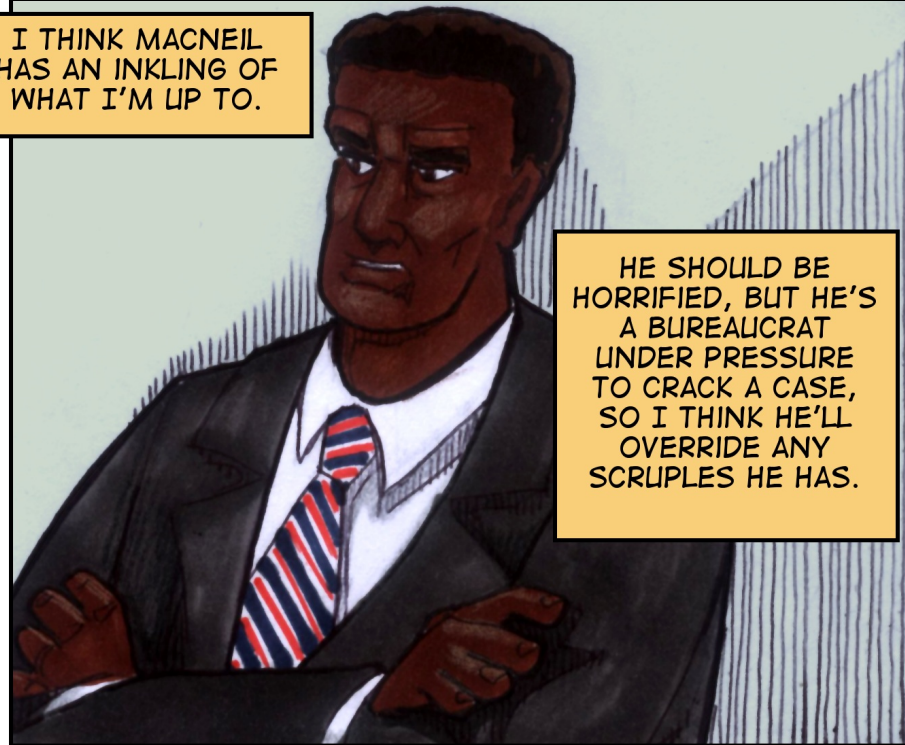


LEHMAN, A TRUE PSYCHIATRIST, IS COMMITTED TO HELPING HIS PATIENTS ACHIEVE AUTONOMY AND RATIONALITY.



THOUGH ONLY AS LONG AS THOSE PATIENTS USE THEIR RATIONALITY AND AUTONOMY TO MAKE THE "RIGHT" CHOICES, OF COURSE.

I THINK MACNEIL HAS AN INKLING OF WHAT I'M UP TO.



HE SHOULD BE HORRIFIED, BUT HE'S A BUREAUCRAT UNDER PRESSURE TO CRACK A CASE, SO I THINK HE'LL OVERRIDE ANY SCRIPLES HE HAS.

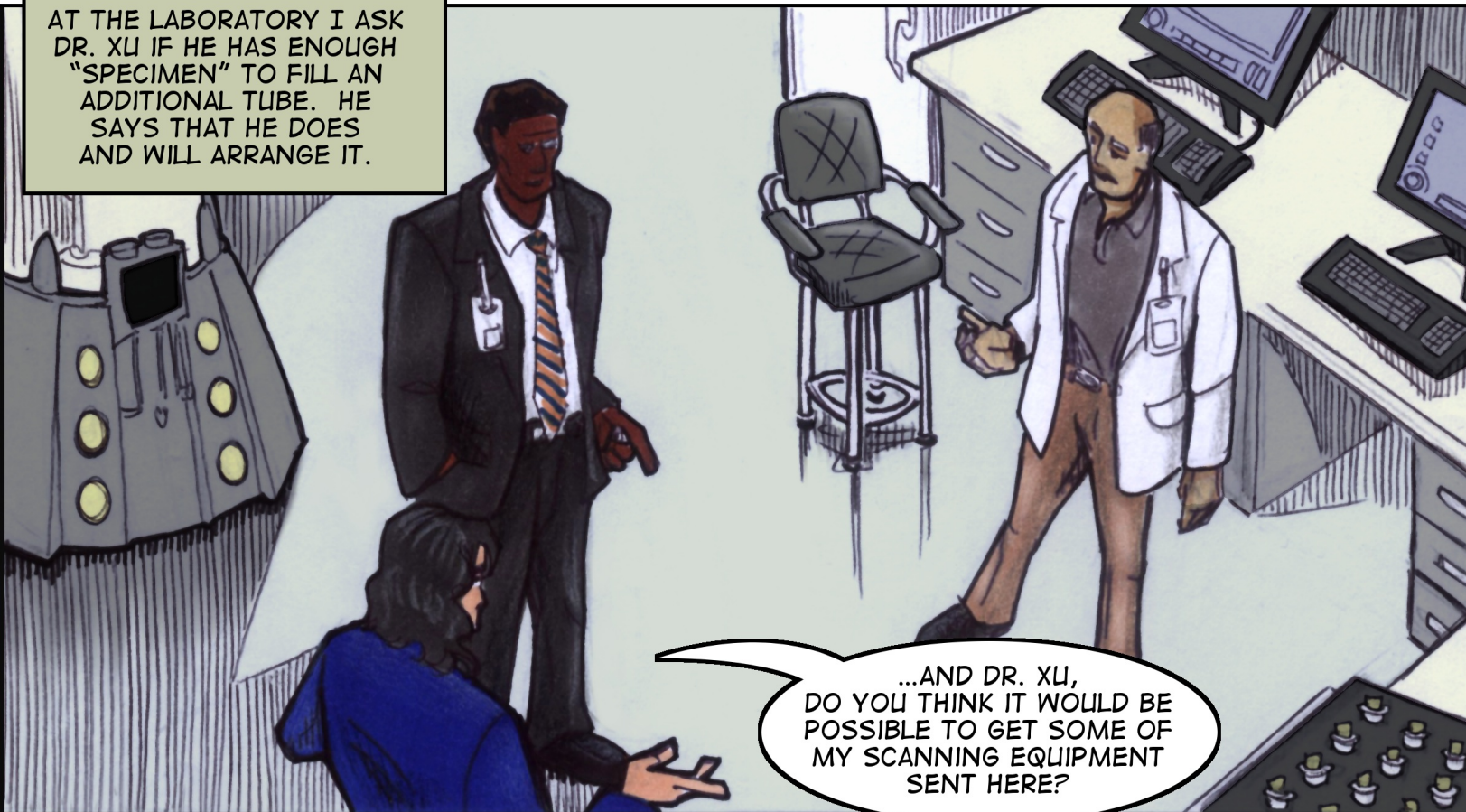


IN THE END, MACNEIL MUST HAVE BEEN CARRYING THE BIGGER STICK, BECAUSE THEY LET ME GO.



AGENT MACNEIL WHISKS ME BACK TO DR. XU'S LABORATORY PROMPTLY.

AT THE LABORATORY I ASK DR. XU IF HE HAS ENOUGH "SPECIMEN" TO FILL AN ADDITIONAL TUBE. HE SAYS THAT HE DOES AND WILL ARRANGE IT.



...AND DR. XU, DO YOU THINK IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO GET SOME OF MY SCANNING EQUIPMENT SENT HERE?

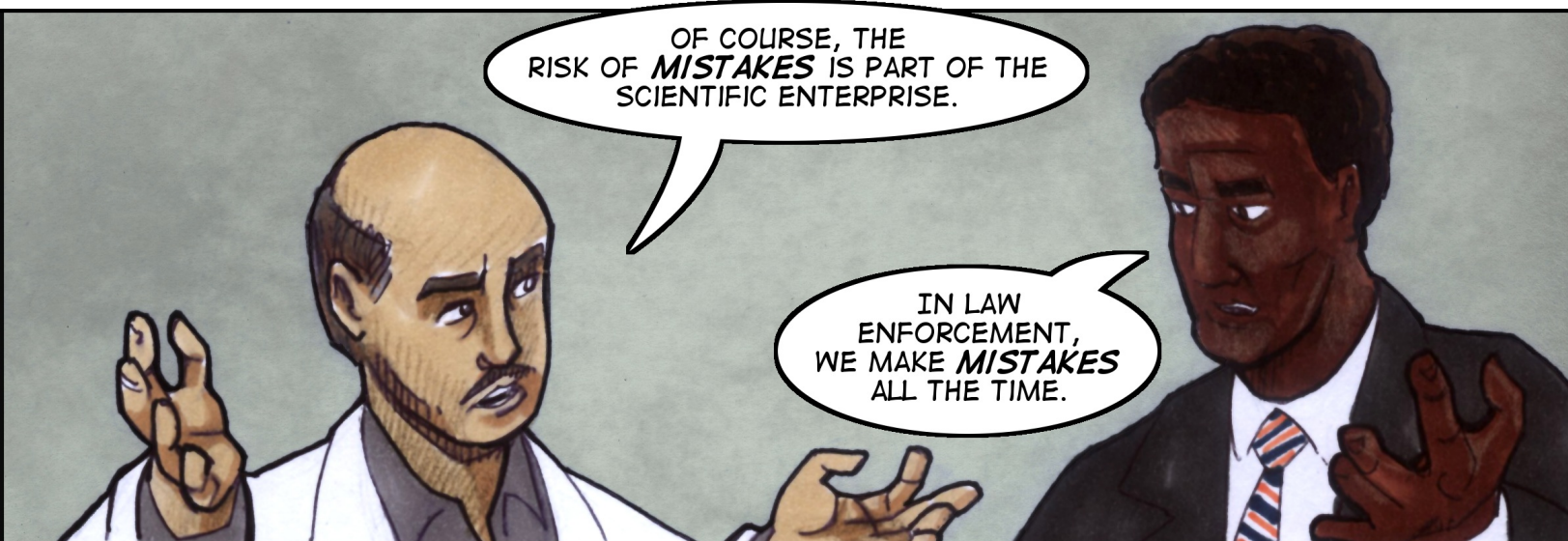
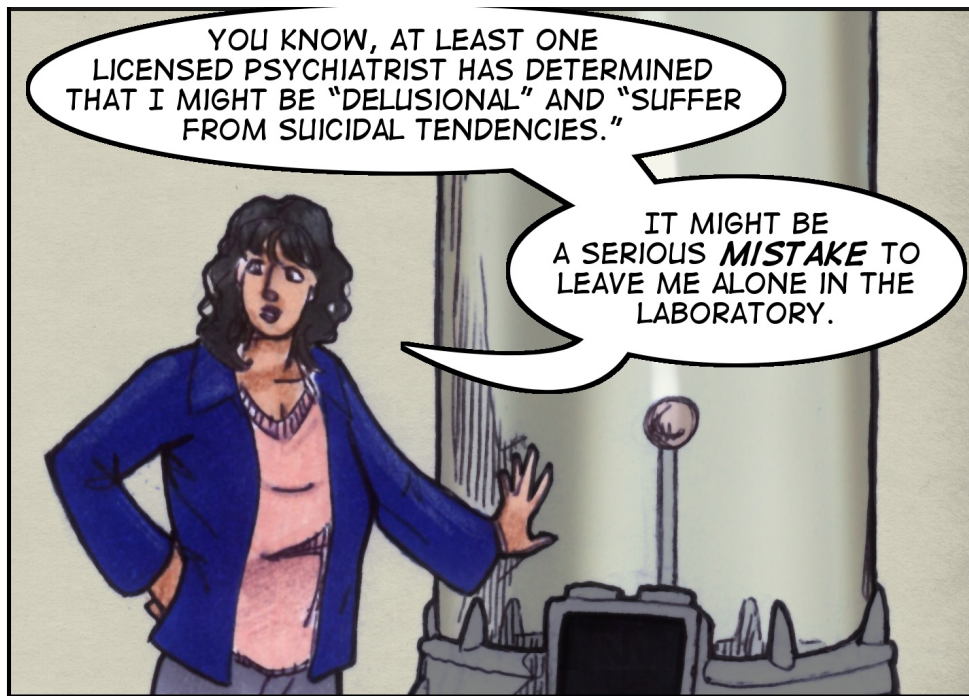
WE COULD EASILY HAVE IT SHIPPED OVERNIGHT, DR. MONTCLAIR. HAVE YOU SOMEHOW FOUND A WAY TO TUNE IT TO A BRAIN OTHER THAN YOUR OWN?

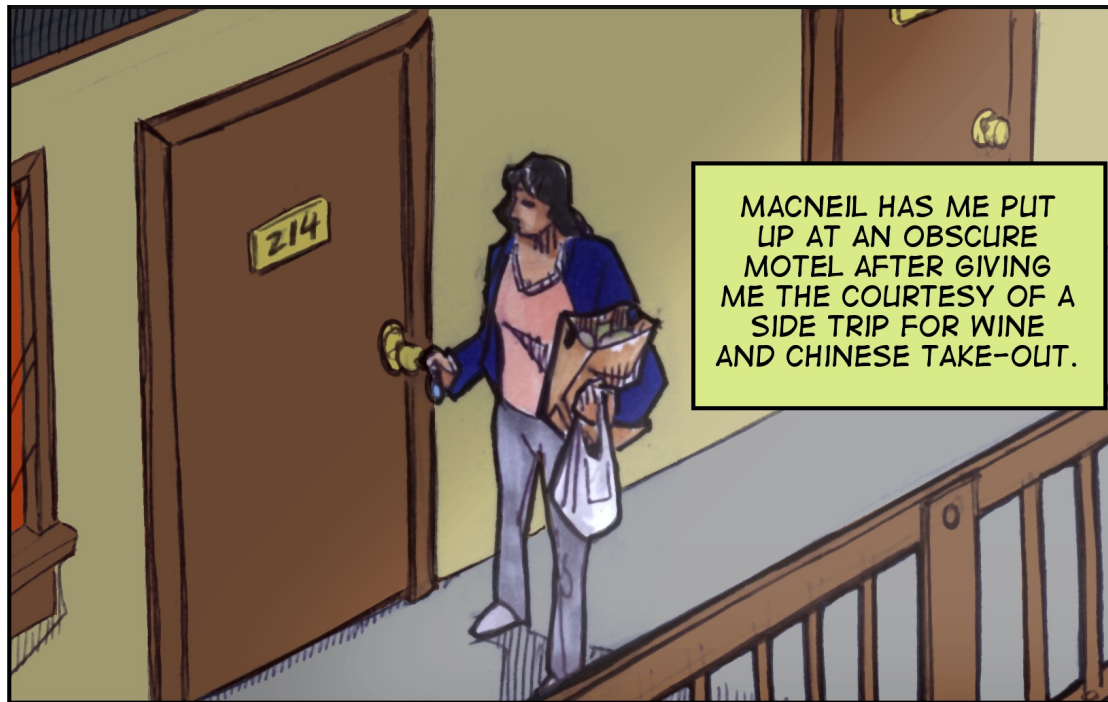


NO.

BUT I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE CONVENIENT TO HAVE THE EQUIPMENT HERE IN CASE A DIFFERENT PLAN SHOULD HAPPEN ALONG.







MACNEIL HAS ME PUT UP AT AN OBSCURE MOTEL AFTER GIVING ME THE COURTESY OF A SIDE TRIP FOR WINE AND CHINESE TAKE-OUT.



HE ARRANGES FOR AGENTS TO BE STATIONED OUTSIDE TO DISCOURAGE *CERTAIN PARTIES* FROM INTERFERING IN WHAT I HAVE PLANNED.

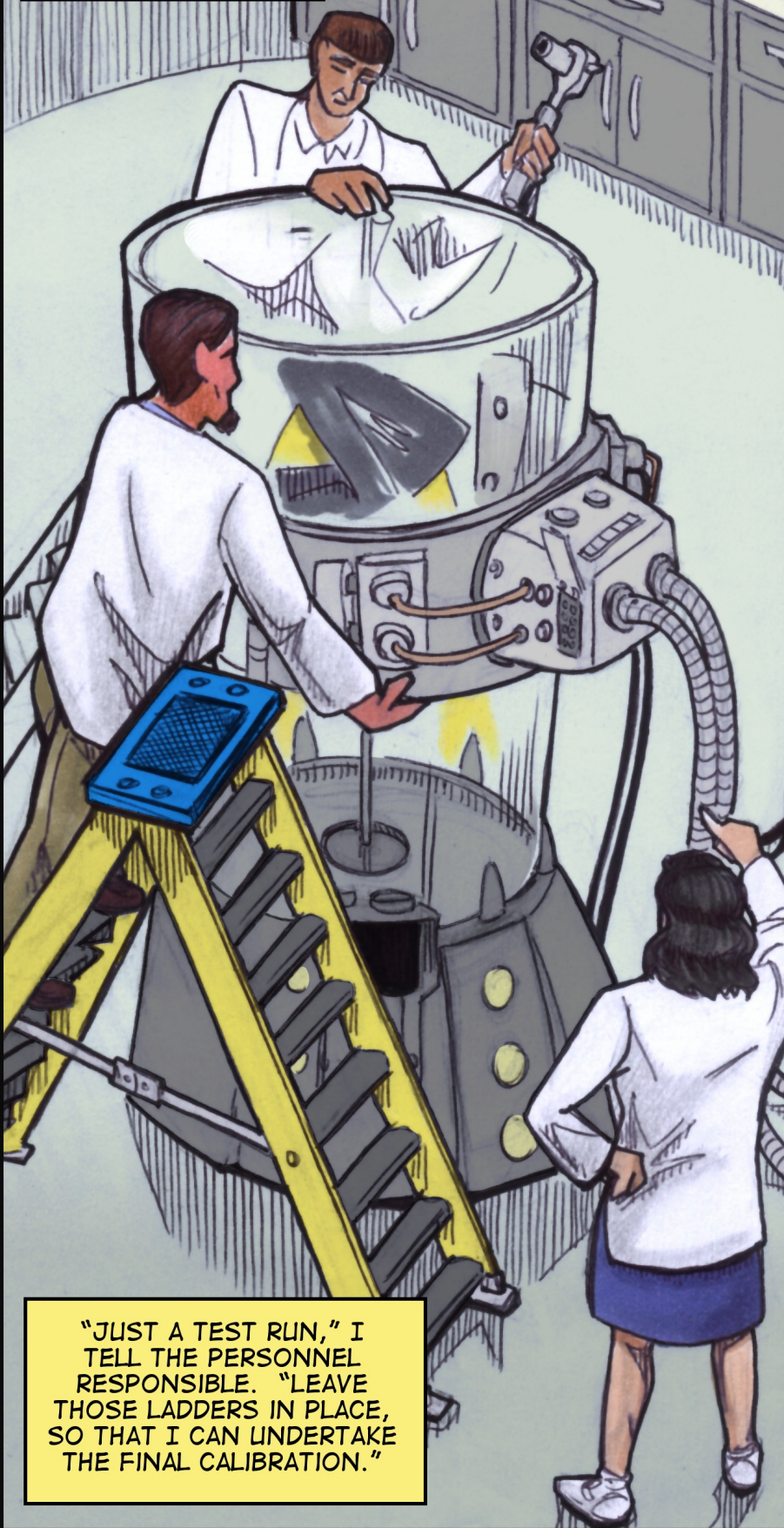
THE WINE I PICKED UP TO ENJOY BY MYSELF WAS WAY OVER MY NORMAL BUDGET.



BUT WHAT THE HELL. IT'S GOING TO BE A LONG TIME AT BEST BEFORE I GET TO TRY SOMETHING LIKE THIS AGAIN.



MY EQUIPMENT ARRIVES THE NEXT DAY, AND I SPEND MOST OF THAT TIME DIRECTING ITS INSTALLATION.



"JUST A TEST RUN," I TELL THE PERSONNEL RESPONSIBLE. "LEAVE THOSE LADDERS IN PLACE, SO THAT I CAN UNDERTAKE THE FINAL CALIBRATION."

ONE OF THE JUNIOR MEMBERS OF XU'S TEAM, ANDY, I THINK HIS NAME IS, IS A BIT FORWARD.



ENJOY IT WHILE YOU CAN, BUDDY.



DR. XU CALLS A MEETING IN THE LATE AFTERNOON, MANDATORY FOR EVERYONE IN HIS LAB, BUT NOT FOR ME.

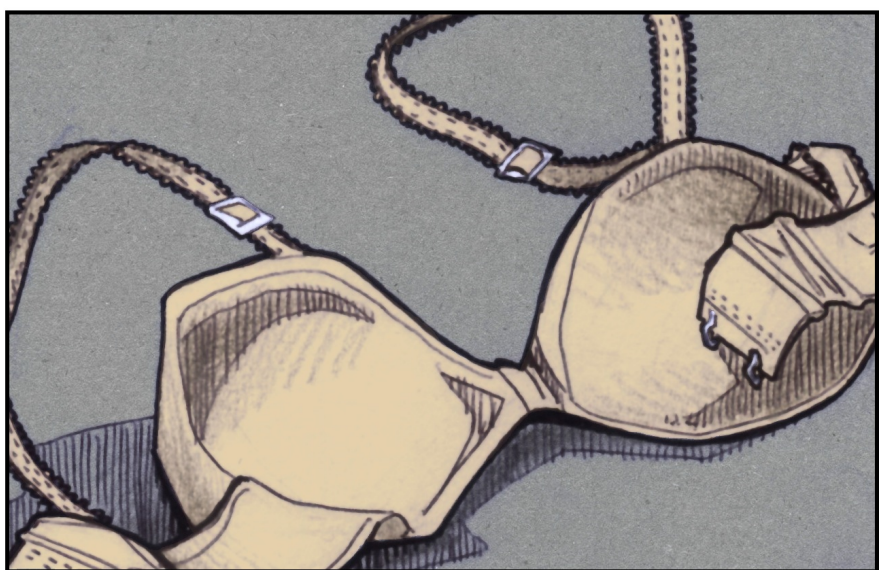
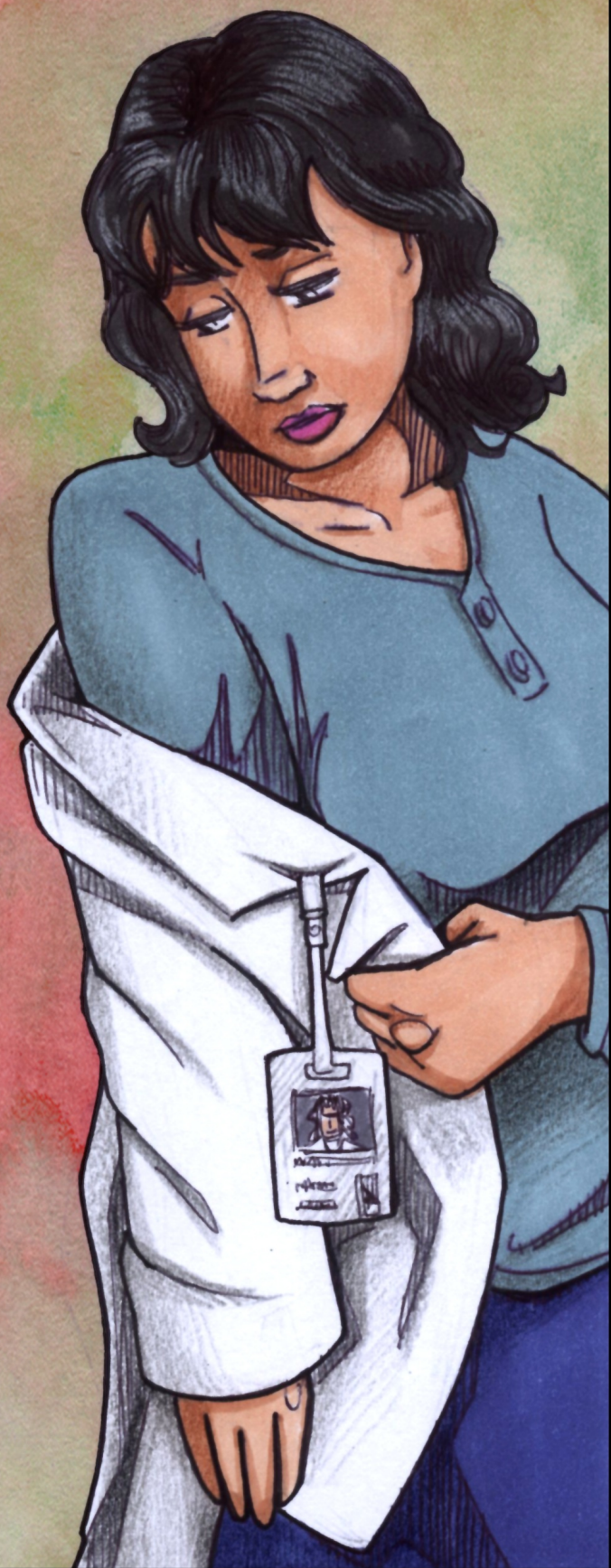


AND SO NOW I HAVE THE FACILITY TO MYSELF.



SHOWTIME.

LET THERE BE NO DOUBT
ABOUT WHO DID THIS.



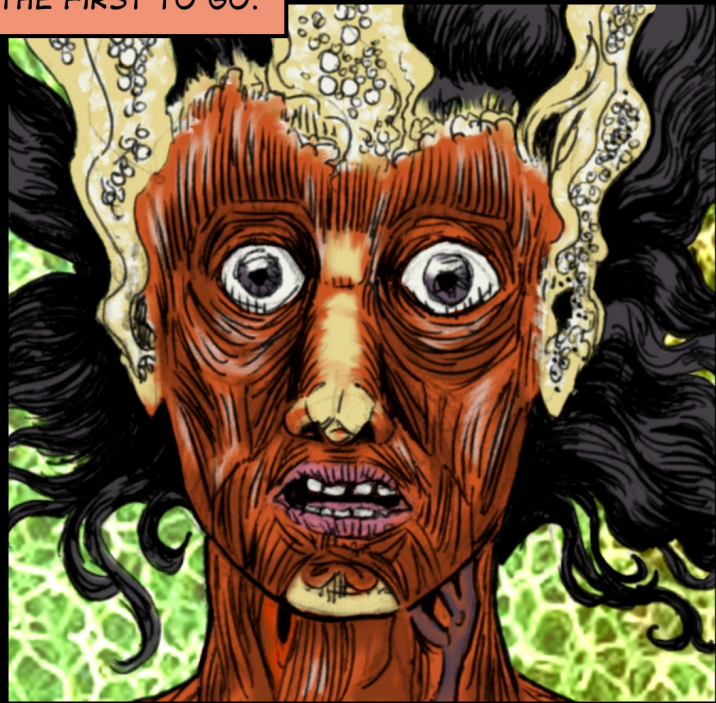
HERE GOES.



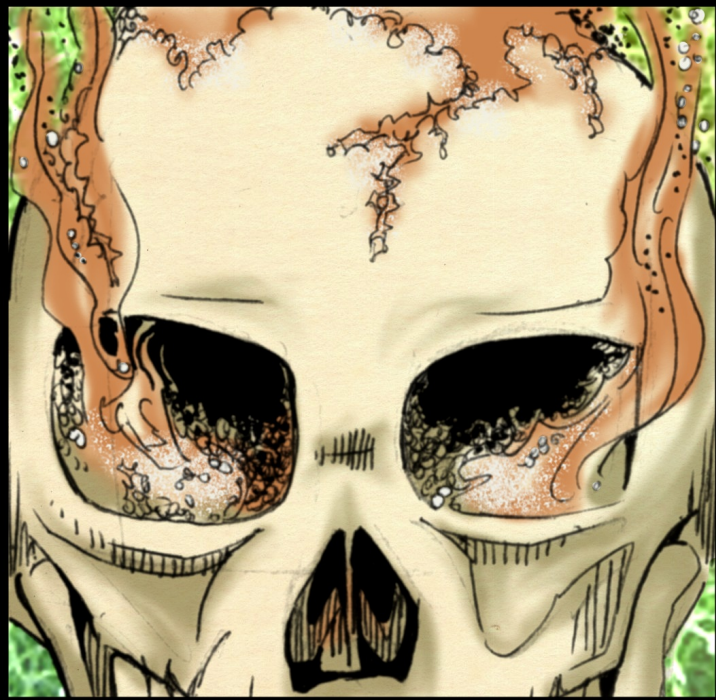


IT BEGINS WITH A WARM
TINGLING FEELING ON MY SKIN.

AND THE SKIN IS
THE FIRST TO GO.



NORMAL EXTERNAL SENSES
VANISH ALTOGETHER AS THE
ORGANS ON WHICH THEY
DEPEND ARE EATEN UP.



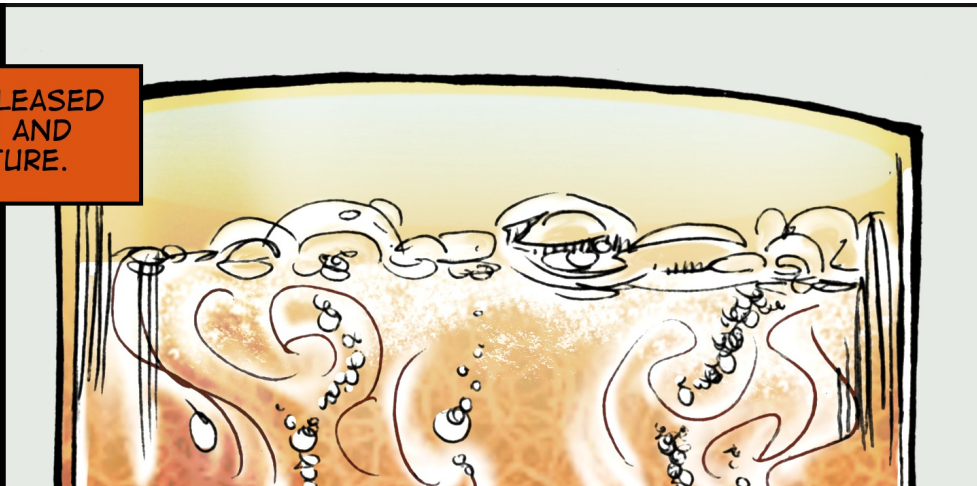
I CAN FEEL EVERYTHING GOING
SLACK AS MY MUSCLES GO AWAY.



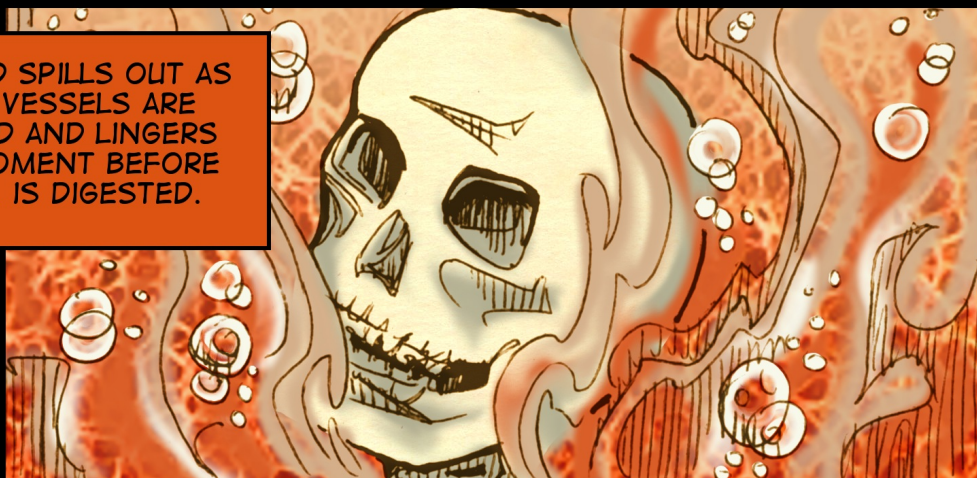
I IMAGINE THAT THE MAJOR
BONES MUST BE DROPPING
AWAY AS THE CONNECTIVE
TISSUE THAT HOLDS THEM
TOGETHER TURNS TO LIQUID.



GASSES ARE RELEASED
AS MY LUNGS AND
VISCERA RUPTURE.



MY BLOOD SPILLS OUT AS
MAJOR VESSELS ARE
BREACHED AND LINGERS
FOR A MOMENT BEFORE
IT, TOO, IS DIGESTED.



MY HEART
FINALLY MELTS.




AT LAST MY HARD
SKULL IS BROKEN AWAY.



FINALLY, LIBERATION.


AT LEAST, THAT'S HOW I
THINK OF IT IF I WANT TO PUT A
POSITIVE SPIN ON MATTERS.



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a red dress, is shown floating in a red, swirling vortex. The vortex has a textured, almost cellular appearance. The woman's expression is one of serene bliss.

FOR A WHILE I DRIFT IN A
SORT OF HAPPY DAZE. IT
FEELS FOR ALL THE WORLD
LIKE POST-COITAL BLISS.

THEN, AS IF THEY ARE
PUSHING THEMSELVES
IN, WORDS ENTER
MY CONSCIOUSNESS.

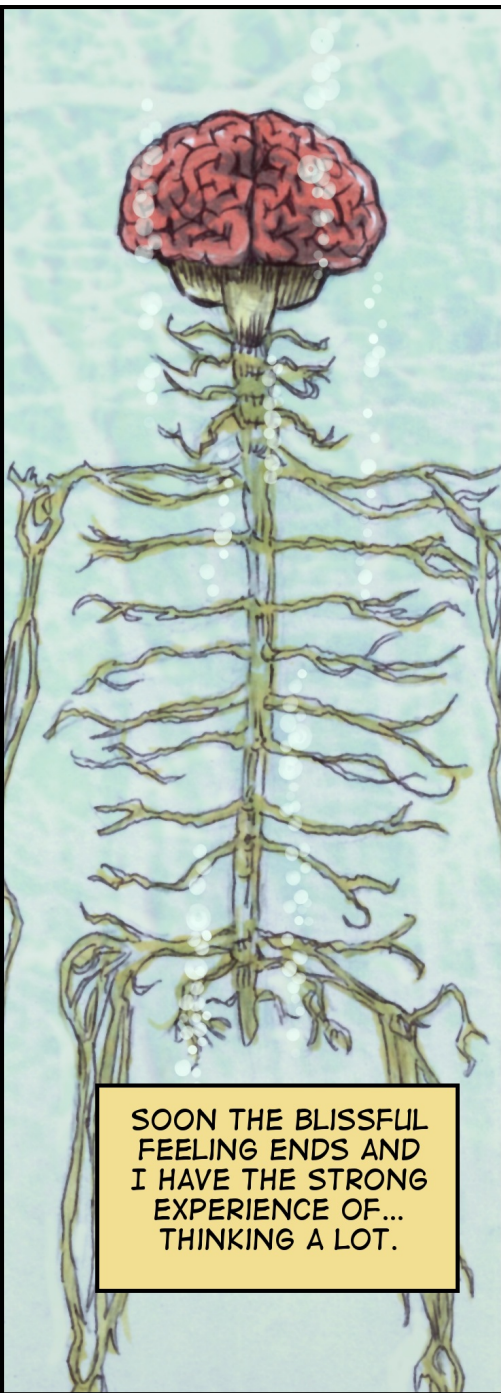
Three men in white lab coats are gathered around a computer monitor. The man in the center, Dr. Montclair, has a concerned expression. The man on the left is looking at the screen, and the man on the right is also looking at the screen with a worried look.

"DR. MONTCLAIR?
ARE YOU THERE?
ARE WE
REACHING YOU?"

A close-up of a man's face, looking intently at a computer screen. The screen displays a green waveform and a grid of green squares. The man's expression is one of intense focus.

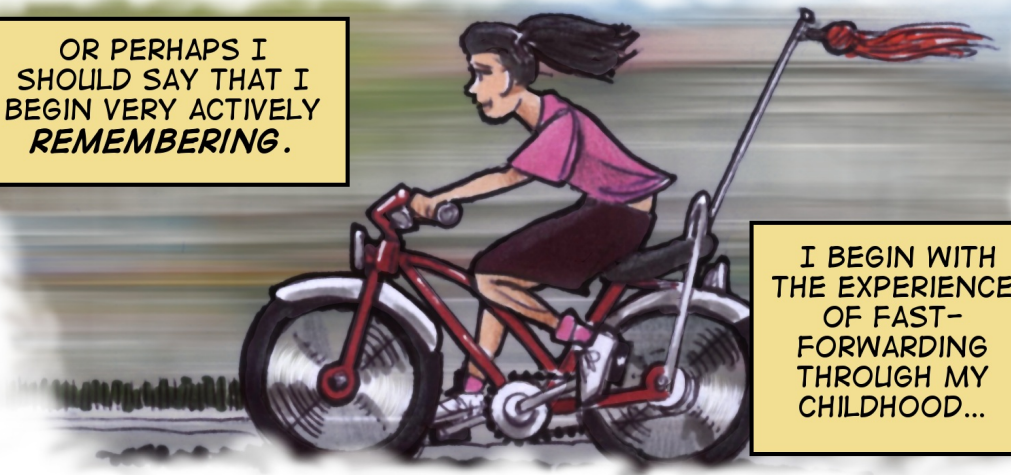
YES...I CAN HEAR YOU,
DR. XU...AND I AM FINE.

"WE ARE GLAD TO HEAR
IT, DR. MONTCLAIR."



SOON THE BLISSFUL
FEELING ENDS AND
I HAVE THE STRONG
EXPERIENCE OF...
THINKING A LOT.

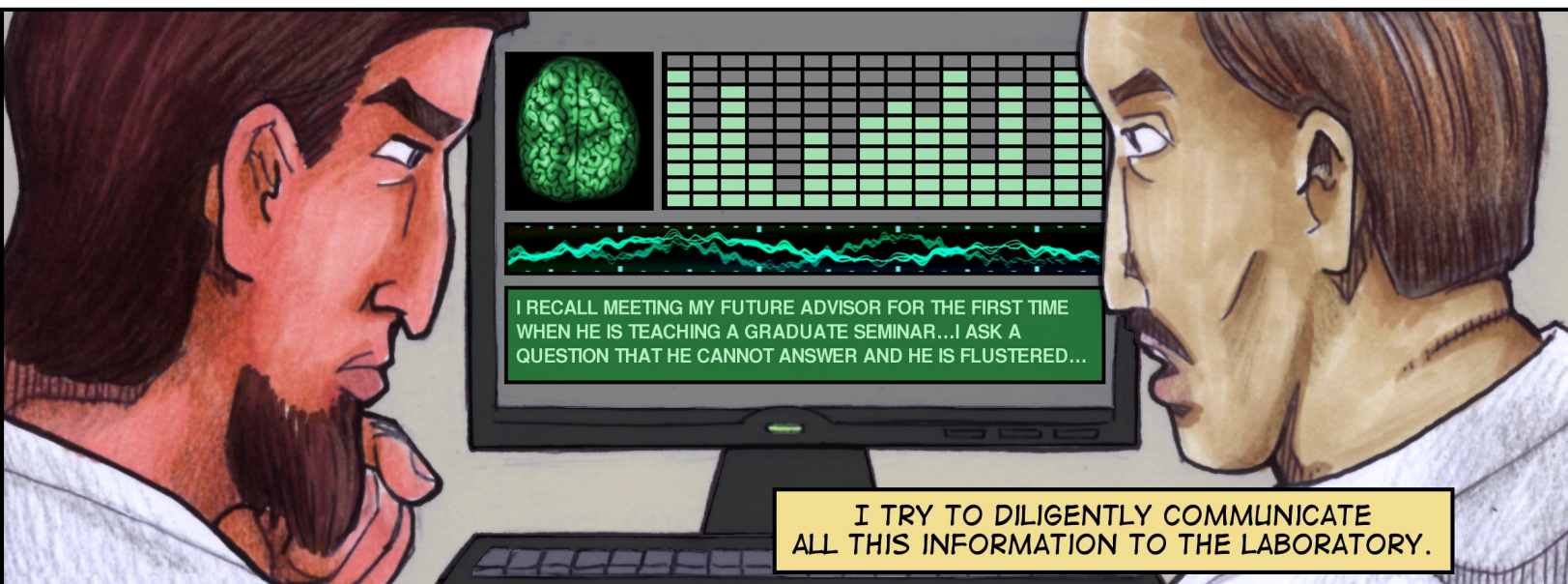
OR PERHAPS I
SHOULD SAY THAT I
BEGIN VERY ACTIVELY
REMEMBERING.



I BEGIN WITH
THE EXPERIENCE
OF FAST-
FORWARDING
THROUGH MY
CHILDHOOD...

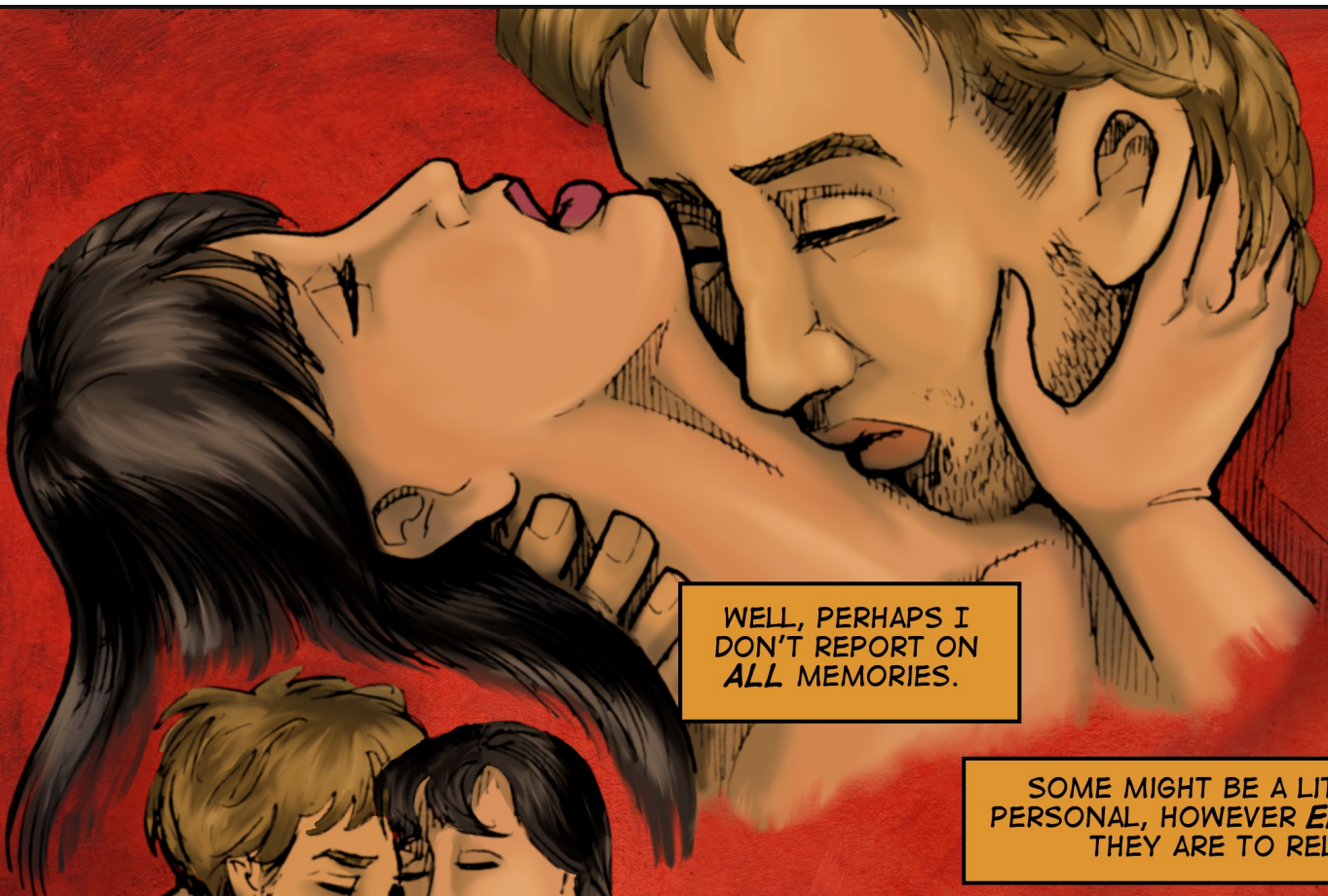


I LINGER FOR A WHILE OVER THE PROUD
MOMENT OF WINNING MY FIRST
BIG SCIENCE PRIZE IN HIGH SCHOOL.



I RECALL MEETING MY FUTURE ADVISOR FOR THE FIRST TIME
WHEN HE IS TEACHING A GRADUATE SEMINAR...I ASK A
QUESTION THAT HE CANNOT ANSWER AND HE IS FLUSTERED...

I TRY TO DILIGENTLY COMMUNICATE
ALL THIS INFORMATION TO THE LABORATORY.



WELL, PERHAPS I
DON'T REPORT ON
ALL MEMORIES.

SOME MIGHT BE A LITTLE *TOO*
PERSONAL, HOWEVER *ENJOYABLE*
THEY ARE TO RELIVE.



A woman with dark hair is lying down, her body partially obscured by a large, glowing, branching neural structure. The structure is composed of red, branching lines with yellow, circular nodes containing intricate patterns. Bright white lightning bolts emanate from these nodes, creating a sense of intense energy and activity. The background is dark, making the glowing neural structure stand out.

WHEN WE GET UP TO THE POINT IN MY LIFE WHEN I BEGIN WORK ON DIRECT NEURAL COMMUNICATION, EVERYTHING SLOWS DOWN DRAMATICALLY. I BEGIN LIVING OUT EVERY DETAIL VERY VIVIDLY.

AT THE SAME TIME AS THIS GOES ON I HAVE A WEIRD DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS OF MY OWN THOUGHTS BEING SOMEHOW CORRELATED WITH MY OWN NEURAL PROCESSES.

THIS SHOULD BE AGONIZINGLY DULL, BUT I SEEM TO GET A FLOW OF PLEASURE FROM THE ACT OF CONCENTRATING ON DETAILS.

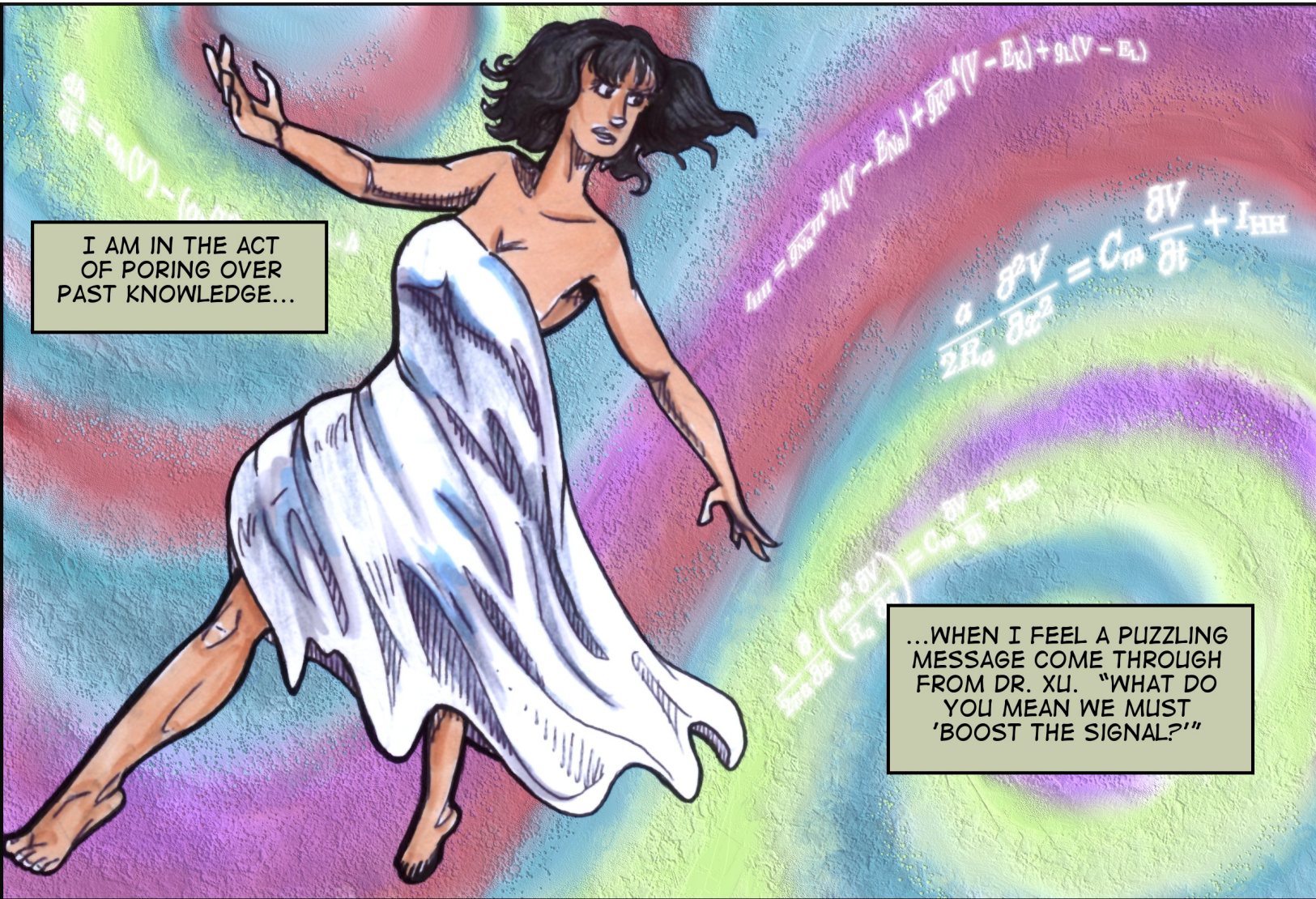
THE HARDER I CONCENTRATE, THE MORE INTENSE THE SENSATION.

A man with dark hair and a white shirt is looking at a computer screen. A woman with blonde hair and a white shirt is also looking at the screen. The man is speaking, and the woman is responding. The background is a simple, light-colored wall.

I IMAGINE SOME OF MY REPORTS MUST MAKE FOR *INTERESTING* READING.

"THE PLEASURE IS SO INTENSE..."

WOO!



I AM IN THE ACT OF PORING OVER PAST KNOWLEDGE...

...WHEN I FEEL A PUZZLING MESSAGE COME THROUGH FROM DR. XU. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN WE MUST 'BOOST THE SIGNAL?'"



I DON'T UNDERSTAND. I DIDN'T TRANSMIT THAT.

IT SHOWED UP RIGHT HERE ON MY SCREEN.



I FOCUS ON TRANSMITTING VERY CLEARLY "NO MEMORY OF ANY SUCH MESSAGE. MUST JUST BE A GLITCH."

"PLEASE TRY TO STAY FOCUSED, DR. MONTCLAIR," THEY TRANSMIT BACK. "THIS IS OF THE HIGHEST IMPORTANCE."



MY LIFE'S RECAPITULATION
PROCEEDS UP TO THE POINT
OF MY... TRANSFORMATION.
AND THEN THINGS START
TO GET A LITTLE WEIRD.



I HAVE A STRANGE...

EXPERIENCE?

...

DREAM?



OF BEING A TEENAGE GIRL AND FEELING SATISFIED
AND HAPPY WITH MY... DEVELOPMENT. I'M ABOUT
TO GO SWIMMING IN A LAKE ON A SUMMER'S DAY.

I DULY REPORT MY EXPERIENCE TO MY HANDLERS.
THEY ASK WHETHER I THINK IT IS AN HALLUCINATION.
I SUPPOSE IT *COULD* BE ONE, INSPIRED BY
MY READING IN AMY NINENGER'S DOSSIER HOW
SHE CAME TO HER... TRANSFORMATION.

IT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE
AN HALLUCINATION.
IT FEELS VERY *REAL*.



THE EXPERIENCE IS INTERRUPTED BY DR. XU'S
TRANSMISSION THAT THEY HAVE RECEIVED THAT
PHANTOM LINE "WE MUST BOOST THE SIGNAL" AGAIN.



THINGS GET STRANGER
WHEN I HAVE THE EXPERIENCE
OF MY "MOTHER" SCOLDING
ME IN CANTONESE FOR NOT
BEING DILIGENT ENOUGH ABOUT
DOING MY HOMEWORK.

THIS WOMAN IS NOT MY MOTHER.

AND I DON'T SPEAK CANTONESE.



BUT I SEEM TO UNDERSTAND
WHAT SHE IS SAYING. I
PROVIDE TRANSLITERATIONS
AND TRANSLATIONS.

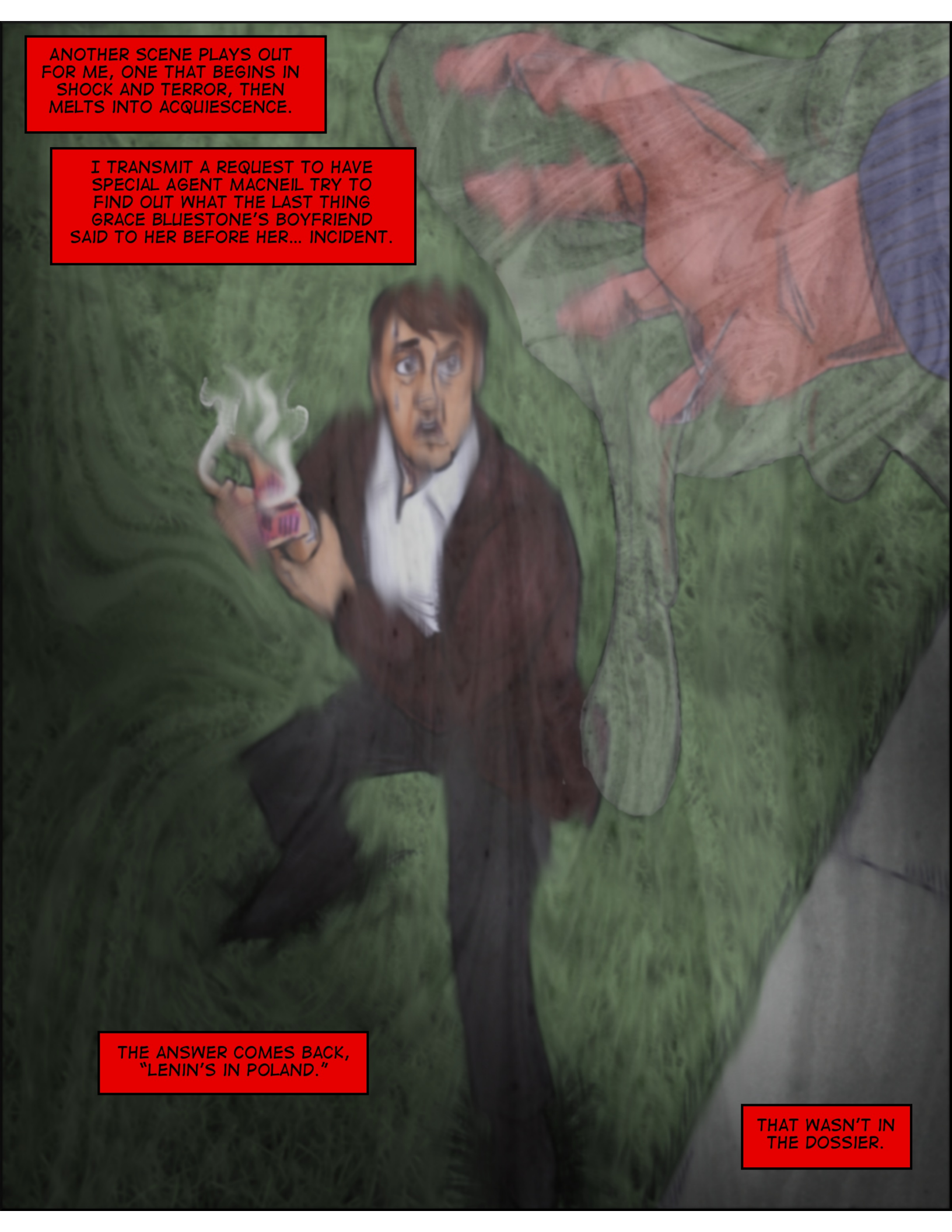
DR. XU AND HIS STAFF CONFIRM
FOR ME THAT THEY ARE
ACCURATE AND MEANINGFUL.

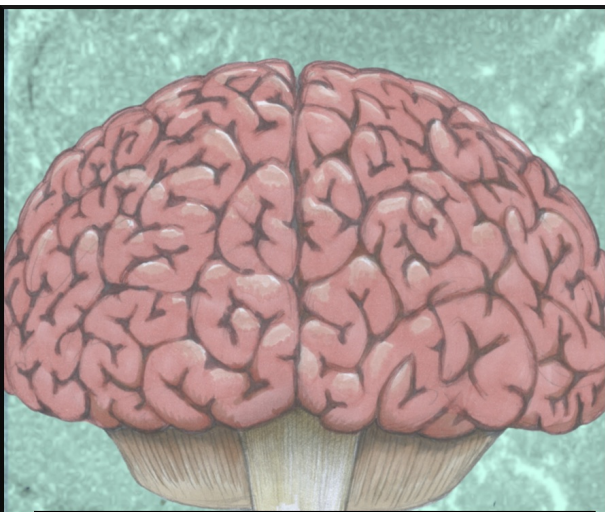
ANOTHER SCENE PLAYS OUT
FOR ME, ONE THAT BEGINS IN
SHOCK AND TERROR, THEN
MELTS INTO ACQUIESCENCE.

I TRANSMIT A REQUEST TO HAVE
SPECIAL AGENT MACNEIL TRY TO
FIND OUT WHAT THE LAST THING
GRACE BLUESTONE'S BOYFRIEND
SAID TO HER BEFORE HER... INCIDENT.

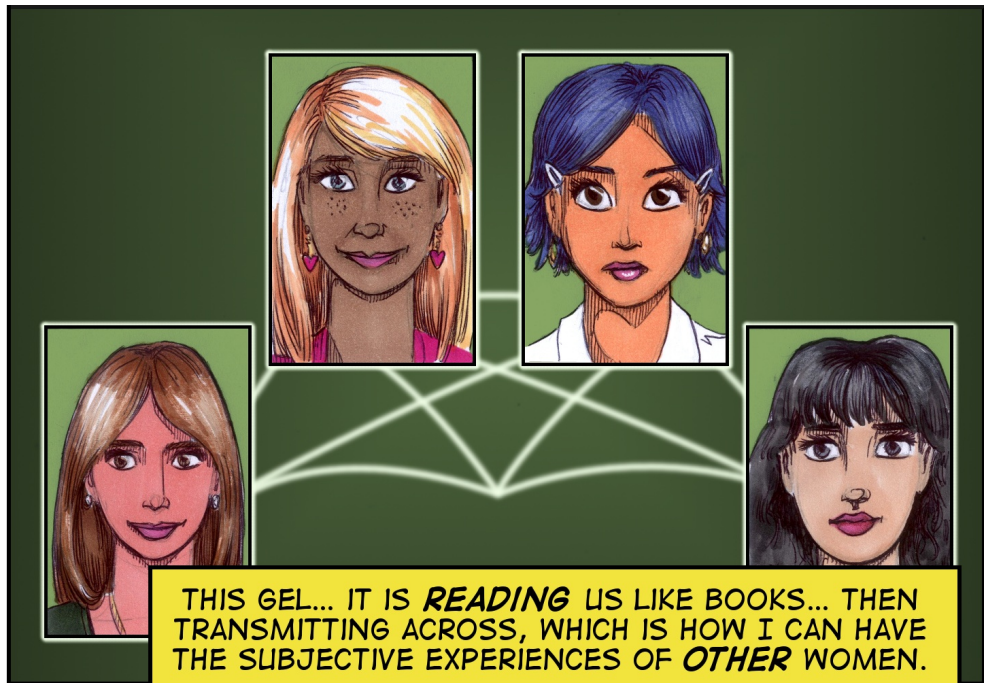
THE ANSWER COMES BACK,
"LENIN'S IN POLAND."

THAT WASN'T IN
THE DOSSIER.

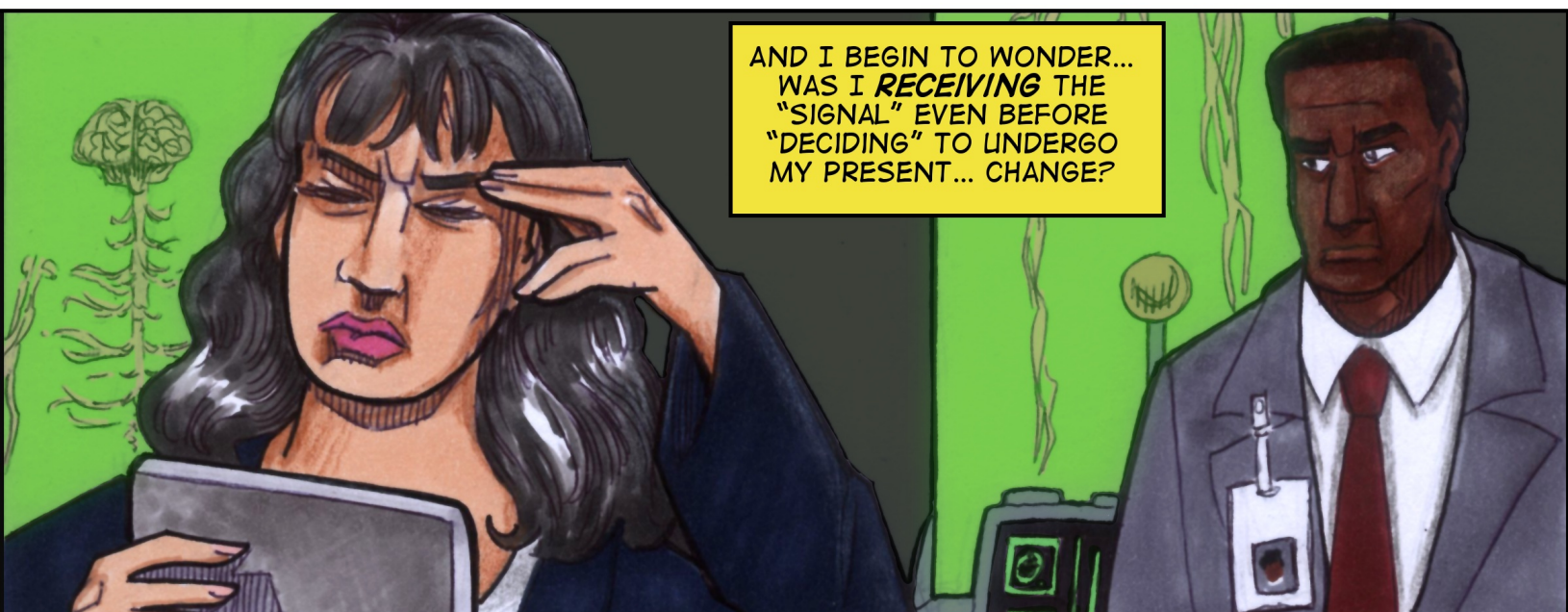




AND IT BEGINS TO DAWN ON ME
WHAT MIGHT BE MEANT BY "WE
MUST BOOST THE SIGNAL," ITSELF
A FORM OF LEAKING SIGNAL...



THIS GEL... IT IS **READING** US LIKE BOOKS... THEN
TRANSMITTING ACROSS, WHICH IS HOW I CAN HAVE
THE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF **OTHER** WOMEN.



AND I BEGIN TO WONDER...
WAS I **RECEIVING** THE
"SIGNAL" EVEN BEFORE
"DECIDING" TO UNDERGO
MY PRESENT... CHANGE?

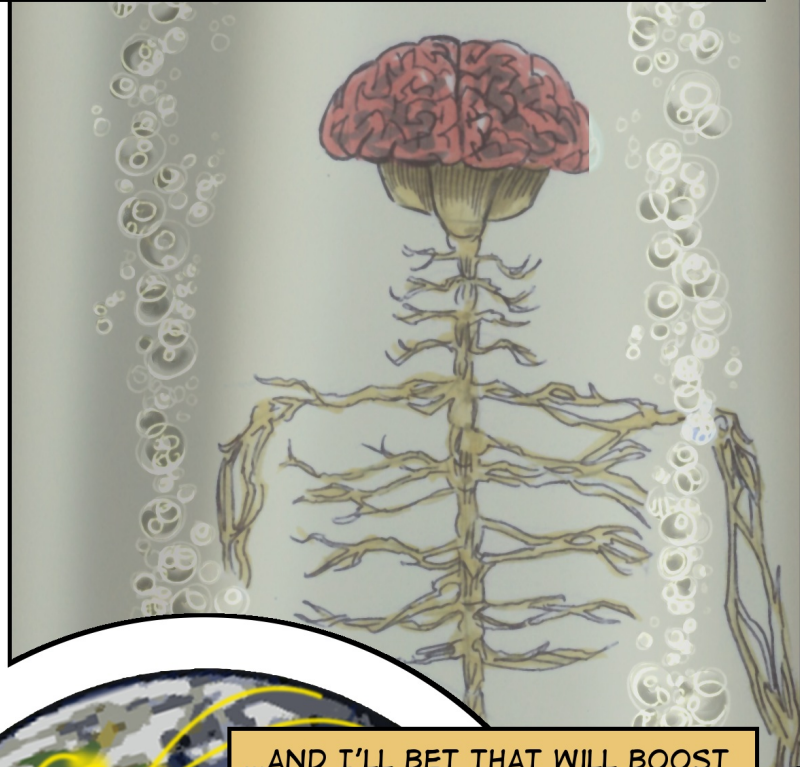


WERE ALL THE COMPELLING "ARGUMENTS" I HAD FOR
DOING WHAT I'M DOING JUST... **RATIONALIZATIONS**
FLOATING ATOP SOME DEEPER MOTIVE?

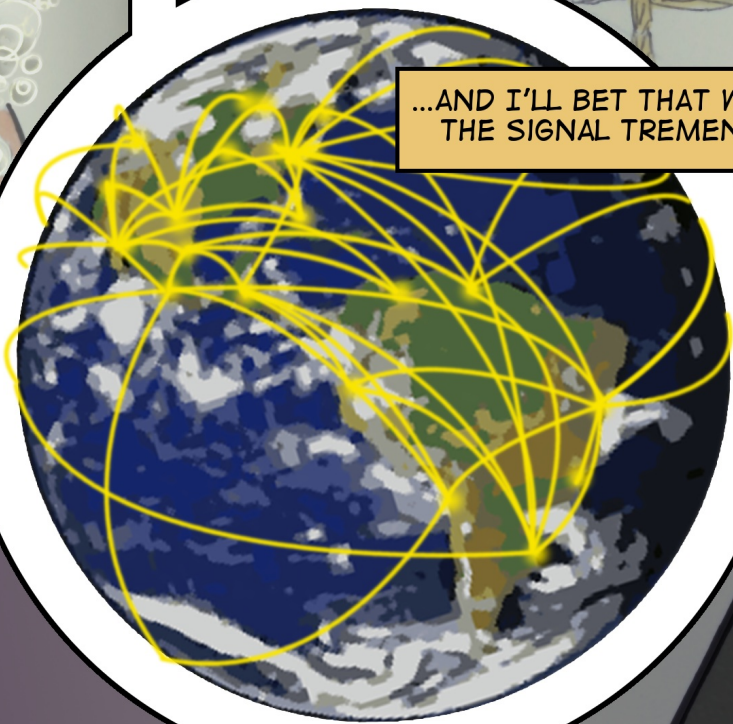
RATIONALIZATIONS OR NO,
I HAVE BEEN LURED IN.



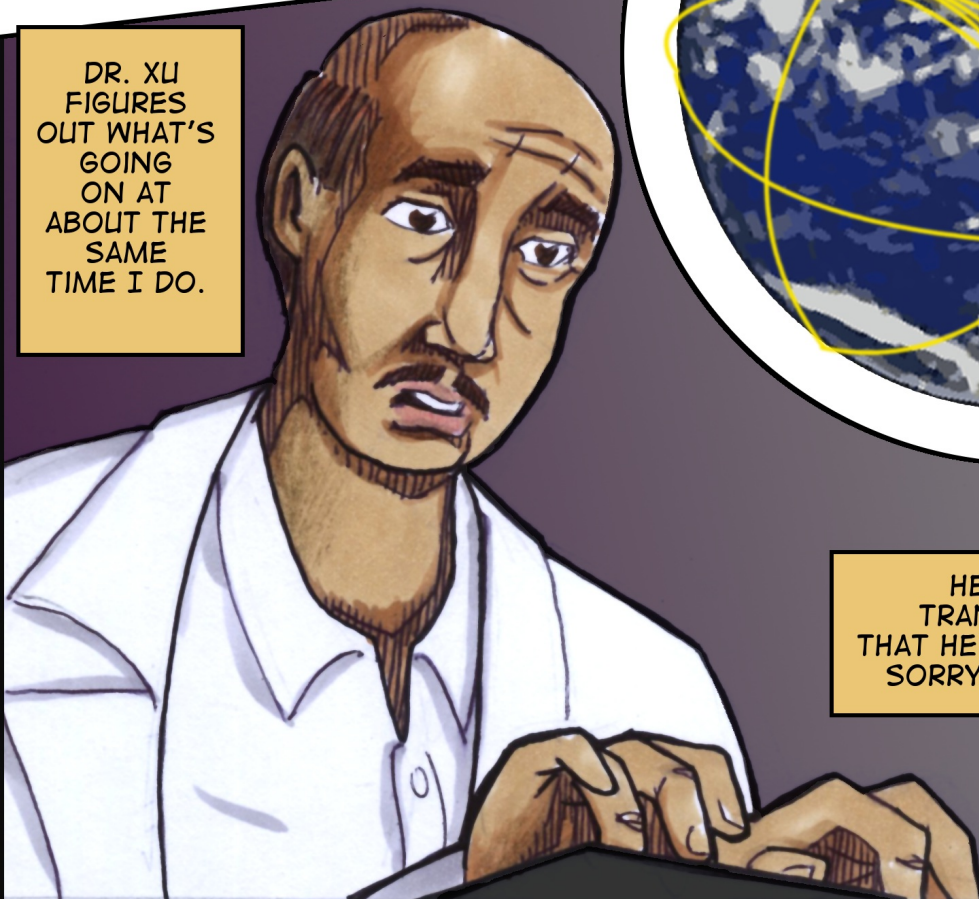
NOW THE GEL HAS READ A BRAIN THAT KNOWS
AS MUCH AS ANY HUMAN BRAIN COULD KNOW
ABOUT HOW HUMAN BRAINS WORK...



...AND I'LL BET THAT WILL BOOST
THE SIGNAL TREMENDOUSLY.



DR. XU
FIGURES
OUT WHAT'S
GOING
ON AT
ABOUT THE
SAME
TIME I DO.



HE BEGINS
TRANSMITTING
THAT HE'S DREADFULLY
SORRY, BUT THAT...





THAT'S ALL RIGHT, DR. XU.
SAVE YOURSELF THE TROUBLE
OF GOING FOR THE NITRIC ACID.

MY ROLE HERE
IS DONE, AND
NOW I'M JUST
SO MUCH TASTY
PROTEIN.

PARDON THE GEL WHILE
IT FINISHES MAKING
A MEAL OF ME.

IT IS TOO LATE
FOR EVERYONE,
GENTLEMEN.

A NEW KIND
OF MIND IS
TAKING OVER.





ALL OVER THE WORLD
THEY WILL COME TO US,
DRAWN BY PLEASURE
TO BECOME OUR FOOD.



WE HAVE BOOSTED
THE SIGNAL, AND IT WILL
GROW EVER STRONGER.



THE END.

"WE MUST BOOST THE SIGNAL"

by

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PAGE 1 (Four panels)

Panel One: AMY NINENGER ("AMY") is inside a vacation cabin, sitting up on a bunk in a nightgown, stretching as if she has just woken up.

Character design note: Amy is an all-American girl, perhaps seventeen years old, slender, strawberry-blonde, tanned (with tan lines made by her swimsuit as described in Panel Three below) and very pretty.

Caption: I love getting up before everyone else.

Panel Two: Amy standing on the floor, lifting her nightgown over her head. We see her bare legs and panties.

Caption: Everything is so peaceful and quiet, and I have the world to myself.

Panel Three: Amy bending over, stepping into a one-piece swimsuit. The swimsuit should be distinctive enough in appearance so that readers can make a clear visual connection to it later, so make it yellow with purple polka-dots.

Caption: I can get out for a swim on a beautiful summer morning.

Panel Four: Close up on Amy's chest. She is cupping her hands under her breasts.

Caption: Huh. Getting a little big here.

PAGE 2 (Single panel, splash page)

Single Panel: Long view, Amy stepping out onto a wooden dock in her swimsuit. The dock extends out into a still lake the lies in a green woods on a gorgeous summer morning, with the sun coming up.

PAGE 3 (Four panels)

Panel One: Amy diving off the dock into the lake.

Panel Two: A splash in the surface of the lakewater (SFX: splash!) as Amy dives in. Her face is made up in a big smile.

Panel Three: Amy's head breaking back through the surface of the water as she re-emerges.

Caption: The water is unusually warm this morning...

Panel Four: Amy breast-stroking through the water.

Caption: All's right with the world.

PAGE 4 (Four panels)

Panel One: A view underwater. We see part of Amy's lower half, her legs kicking through the water as she swims. Something resembling a nearly-transparent tentacle is snaking through the water toward one of her ankles, just about to touch it.

Panel Two: Amy's head and shoulders above the water – she is as if treating water at this point. Her face registers surprise and a little shock.

Panel Three: A column of water jetting up from the surface of the lake, thrown up by displacement as Amy has been pulled suddenly and violently under.

Panel Four: Amy underwater. She is positioned straight up. This panel depicts an event at about the same time as Panel Three, so there should be a trail of bubbles above Amy's head where she has been pulled under. Her face should be scrunched up, as water has just jetted up her nose.

PAGE 5 (Four panels)

Panel One: View of Amy's lower half. Her legs are tangled in a roil of semi-transparent tentacles. They are struggling (indicate with motion lines) but not successfully.

Caption: No!

Panel Two: A view of Amy's face underwater. The semi-transparent tentacles are beginning to wrap around her face. Amy's eyes are squeezed shut and her face registers fear.

Caption: Please...

Panel Three: Amy underwater, now encased in a column of transparent goo. Her eyes are still closed. Patches of her exposed skin appear to be peeling off. Amy's eyes are still closed. Her hands are folded across her chest.

Caption: Oh God, what's happening to me?

Panel Four: View of the surface of the lake at the point where Amy had been pulled under a few seconds before. A few bubbles break the surface of the water.

PAGE 6 (Four panels)

Panel One: Close-up of Amy's P.O.V. She is looking at one of her hands, which shows more of the effect of flesh peeling away and dissolving.

Caption: Must look...oh...no!

Panel Two: Same view as Panel One, except that the view is blurry, as if Amy had suddenly gone profoundly nearsighted.

Caption: And yet I...

Panel Three: The view has faded to a little gray smudge in the middle of the panel.

Caption: ...I don't feel any pain...

Panel Four: A solid black panel.

Caption: I feel so warm.

PAGE 7 (Four panels)

Panel One: MRS. NINENGER, in shorts and a blouse, stands at the end of the dock, calling out.

Character note: Mrs. Ninenger is Amy's mother. She is an attractive woman in early middle age, and bears a strong family resemblance to Amy.

Mrs. Ninenger: Amy! It's time for breakfast! Time to come in!

Panel Two: Mrs. Ninenger walking along a path by the shore of the lake, still calling out.

Mrs. Ninenger: Amy! Where are you?

Panel Three: Mrs. Ninenger's P.O.V. We see Amy's polka-dot swimsuit lying caught among some reeds on the side of the lake.

Panel Four: Mrs. Ninenger, holding Amy's swimsuit in her hands. She looks horrified.

Mrs. Ninenger: Amy?

PAGE 8 (Four panels)

Panel One: SPECIAL AGENT MACNEIL ("MacNeil") and SHERIFF JACKSON ("Jackson") are walking down an institutional-looking corridor together.

Character notes: MacNeil is a sturdily-built African-American man in a conservative suit and tie – the same as the character of the same name in the Tales of Gnosis College. Jackson is a typical American rural sheriff in uniform, complete with boots, Sam Browne belt, and Smokey Bear hat.

MacNeil: You dragged the the lake right away, Sheriff Jackson?

Jackson: The Ninengers have been coming up for summers at their lodge at the lake for years. Solid people. Amy Ninenger was a well brought-up young lady.

Panel Two: Close-up on Sheriff Jackson's face. His face is lined and tired, his eyes partly shadowed by the brim of his hat.

Jackson: Not the sort to get herself into trouble, so given the facts of the case, we expedited the investigation.

Panel Three: Inside a morgue, Jackson introducing MacNeil to BOB GLIMMERBECK ("Glimmerbeck"), a man in a white coat. Jackson and Glimmerbeck are shaking hands.

Jackson: Special Agent MacNeil, this is Bob Glimmerbeck, our county medical examiner.

MacNeil: Dr. Glimmerbeck.

Glimmerbeck: Special Agent.

Panel Four: Glimmerbeck pulling on surgical gloves.

Jackson: (out-of-panel balloon): Show Special Agent MacNeil what we found, Bob.

Glimmerbeck: Sure thing, Sheriff.

PAGE 9 (Four-panels)

Panel One: An autopsy table. An array of clean white bones, comprising most of a small adult human skeleton, lie arranged on a table. Note that the bones should not be joined but laid out on the table separate. Also, the skull should not be intact, but rather separated into its separate parts, and some of the bones should clearly be missing.

MacNeil (out-of-panel balloon): Jesus

Panel Two: Glimmerbeck, holding up one small bone in his surgically-gloved hand. Glimmerbeck: This is what we found, Agent Macneil. The bone is clean, no soft or connective tissue or even marrow.

Panel Three: Faces of Macneil (who looks shocked) and Glimmerbeck looking down.

Macneil: But how do you...

Glimmerbeck: DNA in the bone cells itself, and also the family dentist identified some work in the teeth.

Panel Four: Close-up on a piece of bone.

Caption: No signs of either animal activity or tool-work on the bones.

Caption: It's like Amy Ninenger just dissolved.

PAGE 10 (Four panels)

Panel One: DR. HOPE MONTCLAIR ("Hope") is seen lying in an MRI tube, wearing a hospital gown.

Character design note: Hope is a woman in her late twenties, pretty with short black hair and intense black eyes. She should be pale (spends a lot of late nights in the lab) and a little short.

Caption: There might have been more tedious things done for the sake of science than what I'm doing now.

Panel Two: Close up on Hope's face as she lies in the tube. She is wearing a look of intense concentration.

Caption: Something having to do with the classification of beetles, maybe.

Panel Three: A P.O.V. for Hope. She is looking at the projection of four images of an eye, a tin can, waving lines representing water, and a female sheep (thus a rebus Eye-Can-Sea-Ewe="I can see you.").

Caption: The hope is that I can focus on images and their relationship to language really hard and for a really long time.

Panel Four: A "scan view" of Hope's brain, projected on a screen outside the MRI tube.

Caption: The hope is that eventually we will have a comprehensive mapping between concepts in my mind and activity in my brain.

PAGE 11 (Three panels)

Panel One: Hope, now in casual dress, sits on a couch with BRIAN BUTLER ("Brian"), her boyfriend. Both look tired. They are watching television, illuminated by the light of its glow.

Character design note: Brian is a generically good-looking guy in his late twenties.

Caption: Evenings I go home and relax in the company of my boyfriedn Brian, who's adequate, I guess.

Caption: He used to be in science like me, but decided to throw it over for a the big money in finance.

Panel Two: Close-up on Brian who appears to be dozing off in the light of the television.

Caption: I'm beginning to suspect that he wants me to become the nice wife that will go along with his nice career.

Panel Three: View of Hope on the couch. She's now looking down at a laptop, reading the screen with a look of inspiration as if an interesting idea has just stuck her.

Caption: I naively continue to think that there's some great adventure to be had in science, though.

PAGE 12 (Four panels)

Panel One: We see the hand of FAITH QUEK ("Faith") reaching into a tiled shower stall to turn on the shower.

Character design note: Faith is an attractive Asian-American woman in her early thirties. Her design is at the discretion of the artist.

Caption: Shitty day at work, and the traffic was murder.

Panel Two: Faith standing in the bathroom, beginning to undress.

Caption: A nice hot shower will do me good.

Panel Three: View of the shower-head in the shower. In addition to water streaming out of it, some sort of goopy substance is dripping out and falling downward.

Caption: And then I guess I'll curl up with a book and fall asleep.

Panel Four: Close-up on Faith's bare feet as she is stepping out of her panties.

Caption: Alone, as so often.

PAGE 13 (Four panels)

Panel One: View of Faith's bare feet as she is stepping into the shower. She is stepping into the same goopy substance which we saw dripping out of the shower head on Page 12, Panel Three above.

Caption: Ick! What the...

Panel Two: View of Faith, approximately waist-up. She is naked, having just undressed to get in the shower. Her arms cross in front of her breasts, covering them, and just below her navel we see the goop covering her, dripping off her. She looks terrified.

Faith>: No!

Panel Three: Outside view. We are looking down from above at a little detached bungalow – Faith's dwelling. Outside the bungalow in its driveway is parked a subcompact car. One or two of the bungalow's windows should be lighted.

Faith: (jagged balloon projecting from one of the bungalow's lighted windows): Somebody please help me!

Panel Four: A view of Faith's skull, lying on the floor of the shower. The skulls is encased in goo.

Caption: Can I really be so screwed?

PAGE 14 (Four panels)

Panel One: view of Hope's face as she lies inside the MRI machine again.

Caption: After several months during which I thought my eyeballs might start to bleed we are finally making progress.

Panel Two: An instrument panel. On the left-hand side of the panel is a small video screen showing a scan of Hope's brain. On the right there is a monitor on which words are being printed IN THE BLUE VALLEY THERE ARE ANIMALS YOU CAN EAT. IN THE GREEN VALLEY THERE ARE ANIMALS THAT CAN EAT YOU.

Caption: Our software has finally learned enough to start turning neural patterns into concepts and syntax.

Panel Three: Hope, now sitting in an ordinary office chair. Her head is braced so that it cannot move, and some sort of antenna-like device is pointed at her head.

Caption: In time, our hardware also improves.

Panel Four: Hope and some older male scientists all standing in a circle, raising glasses of champagne in a toast.

Caption: Dreams of telepathy have come true, at least for one woman scientist.

Caption: Our team heads are in Nobel prize territory here. Though I'm not. Too junior. Also too female.

PAGE 15 (Four panels)

Panel One: GRACE BLUESTONE ("Grace") and her boyfriend STANLEY ("Stanley") are walking along a lighted path on a college campus at night. There are leafy trees that extend their branches over the path.

Character design note: They make an attractive couple, casually dressed and in their early twenties. Their designs are otherwise at the discretion of the artist.

Stanley: And so the painter said "Lenin? Lenin's in Poland!"

Grace: Oh, ha ha. Saw that punchline coming kind of a long way away.

Panel Two: View from up in one of the trees the limbs of which overhang the path on which Grace and Stanley are walking. A big mass of goop is on one of the main limbs and is just beginning to drip off to the path below.

Grace (out-of-panel balloon): Though I'll concede that approaching Soviet political history through jokes is an audacious approach.

Panel Three: A bit of the goo drips onto Grace, who scrunches her shoulders and looks disgusted.

Grace: Oh, yuck! What is that?

Panel Four: Stanley is reaching over to Grace with a handkerchief. Stanley looks solicitous, and Grace is beginning to look a little shocked.

Stanley: Probably just some damn bird. Here, let me help you.

Grace: Stanley, I don't think that was just a bird...

PAGE 16 (Four panels)

Panel One: Stanley is holding his right hand as if it has just been terribly burned. His face registers pain. Grace is falling away to his side, her head now encased in goo.

Stanley: (jagged-edged balloon): Ah!

Grace: (moan)

Panel Two: Close-up of the face of a mobile phone held in Stanley's left hand. On the face of the phone we can see the digits 911.

Panel Three: A police car driving at night – meant to be moving as if responding to the emergency that Stanley has just phoned in. Its lights should be flashing. (SFX Eeeeeee!)

Panel Four: Stanley is sitting on the path, his face registering shock. He is cradling his damaged hand under one of his arms. POLICEMAN #1 is crouching down next to him.

Stanley: It took her...it ate her...it took her...it ate her...

Policeman #1: Please try to calm down, sir. What took who?

PAGE 17 (Four panels)

Panel One: Stanley, still sitting on the path, pointing and gesturing with a wild expression on his face. Policeman #1 is looking in the direction in which he is pointing.

Stanley: It took her...that way...down the path...

Panel Two: Policeman #1 and POLICEMAN #2, viewed head on. They are hard to see, as they are pointing bright police flashlights "out of the panel" toward the reader.

Panel Three: The policemen's P.O.V. We are looking down the path with illumination laid out in bright ovals created by the beams of the policemen's flashlights., There is a wet, slimy trail leading down the path lying in the path are a few items of Grace's outer clothing, rumbled and also slimy.

Panel Four: More of the policemen's P.O.V., now looking across a patch of grass that has been torn and pressed flat by something passing over it. IN the torn path lies some rumbled items of Grace's underclothing.

PAGE 18 (Four panels)

Panel One: A smaller oval of illumination from a police flashlight. In the middle of the light lies a human femur.

Panel Two: A look up, as if from below, at the faces of the two policemen. The faces are illuminated as if from below by the reflected light from their flashlights. The faces register shock and horror.

Policeman #1: Jesus...

Policeman #2: We need backup.

Panel Three: Men in hazmat suits and carrying assault rifles jumping out of the back of a van.

Panel Four: View from above of the armed men in their hazmat suits making their way across an overgrown field. They are illuminated from above by a large circle of light, as if projected downward by a helicopter's spotlight.

PAGE 19 (Four panels)

Panel One: Men in hazmat suits removing the protective grill from a large storm-sewage pipe.

Panel Two: A man in hazmat suit crawling down the pipe.

Panel Three: A man in a hazmat suit, now standing up in some sort of underground chamber, sweeping it with a powerful flashlight.

Panel Four: Close-up of the face of a man in a hazmat suit. His face is entirely covered by a mask, but we can see his eyes through the goggles of the mask, and they are wide and staring.

PAGE 20 (Four Panels)

Panel One: Agent Macneil is shaking hands with Hope in front of the glassed double doors of some sort of office building. They are being watched by DR. WINSTON XU ("Dr. Xu")

Character Design Note: Dr. Xu is a slender, middle-aged Asian man. His hair is visibly graying and receding. He normally wears a standard-issue white labcoat.

Dr. Xu: Dr. Montclair, I would like to introduce Special Agent Macneil.

Hope: Pleasure.

Macneil: Likewise, Dr. Montclair.

Panel Two: Hope, Macneil, and Dr. Xu standing side-by-side inside some sort of elevator. All should be wearing some sort of identification badges.

Hope: You people do counter-bioterrorism, right? I'm a bit mystified as to what you need a cognitive neuroscientist for.

Dr. Xu: You'll soon see, Dr. Montclair.

Macneil: We'll have to ask you to keep it in strict confidence of course.

Panel Three: Close-up on Agent Macneil's face. It is deeply lined, showing both fatigue and worry.

Macneil: We wouldn't want to start a panic, after all.

Panel Four: Hope's face as the elevator arrives and the doors open. An ELECTRONIC VOICE announces this fact.

Electronic Voice (radio balloon, out-of-panel):
Arriving sub-level three...doors opening...

Hope: What the...

PAGE 21 (Single panel)

Single Panel: A view (Hope's P.O.V.) of a large room, dimly lit room. The room consists of several large, transparent cylinders, about resting on pedestals about a meter tall. The cylinders themselves are about a meter wide and two-and-a-half meters tall. The cylinders are arranged in rows through the room. Five of the cylinders are occupied by human nervous systems as if dissected out of human bodies — brains on top, with the heavy nerves of the spinal columns hanging down and nerves branching out. Viewed up close, these should have the give the impression of a faint, ghostly outline of a human being floating in the tube. The interiors of the tubes should be illuminated, so that they are brighter than the rest of the room (the effect might be vaguely lava-lamp like). The pedestal of each tube is ringed with all sorts of electronic instruments, and next to some of the tubes there are also small tables containing sealed plastic bags (we can't see what's in them in these panels.)

PAGE 22 (Four panels)

Panel One: Hope is looking up at one of the tubes, her face faintly illuminated by the glow coming from within. Hope has extended her right hand and the tips of her fingers are brushing the glass of the cylinder.

Hope: Dissections? But...

Panel Two: Close-up on Hope's hand. She has lifted one of the plastic bags slightly off the table next to the cylinder where it rests. We can see a human skull – bone picked completely clean – inside the bag. Across the top of the bag there is a seal reading EVIDENCE.

Hope (out-of-panel balloon): And whose skull?

Panel Three: Dr. Xu, his face also slightly illuminated by the glow of the tube. He is looking up at the tube, which is outside the panel.

Dr. Xu: It once enclosed that brain up there.

Dr. Xu: At least, we think it did.

Panel Four: Close-up of Hope's face. She looks horrified and perhaps like she's struggling not to be sick.

PAGE 23 (Four panels)

Panel One: Hope facing Macneil and Xu.

Hope: Look, gentlemen, if you're looking for help investigating a surgically-inspired serial killer I have to tell you, it's really not my field...

Macneil: Not a killer, exactly, Dr. Montclair.

Panel Two: Dr. Xu, gently touching Hope's sleeve, directing Hope's attention to something.

Dr. Xu: Perhaps this will be easiest to understand if you would direct your attention to one of those monitors...

Panel Three: Hope bending forward, looking down at a screen on one of the pedestals. She's frowning at what she is seeing.

Hope: It's...no, this can't be right...not for this brain.

Panel Four: Close-up of the screen. It's a "brain scan," showing a human brain, but with different regions of the brain "lit-up" with bright patches of color.

Caption: This brain is teeming with activity.

PAGE 24 (Four panels)

Panel One: View down as if from inside one of the cylinders. We see Hope and Xu, their images distorted by the curve of the glass in the tube, making them look as if we are seeing them in a funhouse mirror.

Dr. Xu: That's right. Dr. Montclair. These brains are alive.

Hope: But...how?

Panel Two: Close-up view of one of the brains.

Caption: The gel in which these brains are suspended appears to be some sort of symbiotic organism. It provides nutrition and respiration to the tissues.

Caption: It also appears to be engaged in a dense pattern of electrochemical interactions with them.

Panel Three: Hope, Xu, and Macneil around one of the tubes.

Macneil: A bioterrorism response team found these five specimens in a sewer somewhere in the middle west. They were able to retrieve them and bring the back for study.

Panel Four: Macneil, looking into another plastic bag, also sealed with an EVIDENCE label. The bag contains Amy Ninenger's one-piece swimsuit.

Macneil: We think we know the identities of three of them. One was Amy Ninenger, a teenage girl who disappeared while swimming...

PAGE 25 (Five panels)

Panel One: Macneil, counting something off on his fingers.

Macneil: Another was Grace Bluestone, a college student.

Panel Two: Macneil, continued.

Macneil: Her boyfriend actually witnessed her being attacked by a symbiote. He's under extended psychiatric observation now...

Panel Three: Three cylinders standing in the room.

Caption: The other three we have here are unidentified. Chromosomal and DNA sampling indicates that all three were female. Two are probably Caucasian and one is probably Asian.

Panel Four: Close-up on Macneil's face.

Macneil: And we have no real idea what this symbiote is, or where it comes from, or what kind of threat it might represent.

Panel Five: View of one of the trays, laid out next to one of the cylinders,. It contains bags with various bones and some of the clothing Grace Bluestone was wearing at the time she was attacked.

Caption: We do know that these things digest soft tissues of their victims, extrude the bones, and preserve the nervous systems.

PAGE 26 (Four panels)

Panel One: Macneil, standing behind the tray we've just seen in the previous panel, looking down at it.

Caption: And we think that knowing why would be the key to preventing future attacks. Saving lives, Dr. Montclair.

Panel Two: Hope, looking down at one of the panels on one of the pedestals, focusing on it intensely (she really doesn't want to look at anything else in the room).

Hope: I see this is very serious, but I don't understand why you've come to me. Isn't this a FBI or a CDC matter? Or something for the military?

Panel Three: Another view looking down at Xu and Hope from "within the cylinder."

Dr. Xu: It's the brains, Dr. Montclair. They're active. They appear to be thinking. And remembering. And feeling...

Panel Four: Xu and Macneil side by side. Xu is leaning forward slightly, his hands outstretched, as if in a gesture of supplication. Macneil stands straight and looks tough and stoical.

Dr. Xu: If we could just know what they thinking, it might be a vital clue...

Macneil: We might be able to prevent future attacks...

PAGE 27 (Four panels)

Panel One: View of Hope lying in a horizontal tube of her own, a dense web of electrodes attached to her head. Her eyes are closed. A digital readout in a corner of the panel shows the words I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME IT HAPPENED...I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, MAYBE EIGHT OR NINE. I WAS RUNNING DOWN A HILL VERY FAST...

Caption: With the brain-scanning technology which you helped develop...

Panel Two: Hope, looking up from a display. Her expression is sad.

Hope: I'm sorry, gentlemen, but the technology doesn't work that way.

Panel Three: Close-up view of one of the brains floating in the tube.

Caption: Each brain is unique. The scanner only works after a long process of tuning to a specific brain, and that can only be done with a subject who is able to communicate using more normal means.

Panel Four: Hope, standing by the side of one of the cylinders, now looking up.

Hope: If it were my brain up there in one of those tubes you might have hope of communicating with it.

Hope: But as things stand now, hooking up the machine would only give you meaningless noise.

PAGE 28 (Three panels)

Panel One: Macneil is handing a tablet computer to Hope.

Caption: They nod gravely at my explanation.

Caption: Special Agent Macneil gives me dossiers of some of the women to read. I suspect a motivational ploy, but agree to read them anyway.

Panel Two: Hope's P.O.V., looking down at the tablet. She is looking at a file for Amy Ninenger. The front page of the dossier has a picture of Amy, looking sweet.

Caption: It's a bit of a shock to look down at the smiling face of someone whose skull you've just seen.

Panel Three: Reverse view of Hope's face, illuminated by the light of the tablet screen which she is perusing intently.

Caption: I read also about Grace Bluestone. Even in the bureaucratic prose it's clear that they were all human beings with lives and futures.

Caption: I begin to feel motivated.

PAGE 29 (Four panels)

Panel One: Hope, Macneil, and Xu standing side-by-side, the cylinder room behind them.

Dr. Xu; I see. Well then, thank you for your time, Dr. Montclair.

Macneil: I'll see you through security and out.

Panel Two: Macneil and Hope standing next to each other in the elevator. Macneil is handing Hope a business card.

Macneil: If you do think of something you will let us know, Dr. Montclair? I mean, those poor girls, their families...

Hope: I promise to see what I can do.

Panel Three: Hope standing besides her car, a small, old, battered-looking subcompact. She has her keys in her hand, and is looking back over her shoulder with a worried expression.

Panel Four: View of Hope sitting behind the wheel of her car.

Caption: I've thought of something already.

PAGE 30 (Four panels)

Panel One: Hope and Brian looking down at something sketched out on a kitchen table down at which Hope is pointing.

Caption: I have to explain my something to the boyfriend.

Panel Two: Brian and Hope facing each other across the kitchen table. Brian looks horrified, Hope quietly determined.

Brian: This is insane! You're sitting there with a straight face and telling me you want to commit suicide...

Hope: It isn't suicide, Brian. All of those women are still legally alive.

Panel Three: Close-up view of one of the brains floating in the tube.

Caption: What sort of life are you proposing? A future as a disembodied brain floating in a tube full of goo?

Caption: It's not like there's any return from that..

Panel Four: View of a partially-constructed female cyborg lying on a table in a laboratory.

Caption: Not necessarily. There are future possibilities. Surgical transplantation to a vat-grown clone. Or full-body cybernetic prosthesis...

PAGE 31 (Four panels)

Panel One: View of Brian, looking tormented.

Brian: Those technologies are speculative, decades off if they happen at all.

Panel Two: Brian staring bleakly down at the kitchen table.

Brian: You're telling me you that you want to give up on us having a future together.

Panel Three: Silhouette of Brain staring at the wall in the kitchen.

Caption: I suppose I am, Brian.

Caption: I guess I love science more than you.

Caption: It must hurt. I know. And I'm sorry.

Panel Four: Hope in a bedroom, about to pack something into a small suitcase.

Caption: I begin packing to leave, although halfway through the utter incongruity of doing so strikes me.

Caption: After all, it's not like I'll need clothes or a toothbrush where I propose to go.

PAGE 32 (Four panels)

Panel One: "Long shot" showing Hope's little car driving along a rural road at night.

Caption: I drive for a long time thinking. Am I really insane?

Panel Two: View through the windshield again. It is still night. Through the back windshield of her car we can see the flashing lights of a police cruiser.

Caption: It must have been hours later when I was pulled over by the police.

Panel Three: Hope outside her car. She has her hands on the roof of her car and she is being patted down by a female state trooper on the roadside.

Caption: The nice cops politely explain that they have an emergency civil commitment order for me.

Caption: And I can guess why, too. Fuck you, Brian. This is my decision.

Panel Four: Close-up view of Special Agent Macneil's business card.

Caption: I get the inspiration to hand them this and ask that he be contacted.

PAGE 33 (Four panels)

Panel One: A male state trooper, holding a large flashlight and looking down at the business card. His face is illuminated by the light of the flashlight which he is pointing down at the business card, which he is holding in his other hand.

Caption: They're skeptical of what might be a crazy woman. I ask them what they think will happen if they kept material information from a Federal official.

Panel Two: Hope, viewed sitting on a bed through a small panel window in a closed room. She is wearing a hospital gown.

Caption: I have to be medicated and wait for quite a while under observation, a profound indignity.

Panel Three: Hope in a robe being walked down a grim-looking institutional corridor by a large orderly in white.

Caption: The next day I'm told I have a visitor. I really hope it isn't Brian. I am so not in the mood for that.

Panel Four: Hope in a grim-looking institutional room. At a dingy table sits Special Agent Macneil, facing her. Also at the table is DR. JOHN LEHMAN ("Lehman"), a middle-aged psychiatrist.

Caption: Praise Yog-Sothoth.

PAGE 34 (Four panels)

Panel One: Hope now sitting at the table. SA Macneil has a cool, professional expression on his face, Lehman is impassive. Hope is leaning forward.

Macneil: Dr. Montclair. I came as soon as I got the call from the State Police.

Hope: Thank you, Special Agent Macneil.

Panel Two: Close-in view of Hope, who looks a bit like she's straining to keep herself level and professional.

Hope: I think I have thought of a way to help you with your...laboratory issue. I understand of course that you want it kept confidential...

Panel Three: Macneil, his expression now one of seriousness and concentration.

Macneil: Yes. I understand.

Macneil: Dr. Lehman, could I speak with you for a few minutes?

Panel Four: Macneil and Lehman standing in a corner of the room, conferring. They look quite irritated with one another.

Lehman: This patient, Special Agent, is suspected of being delusional and having suicidal tendencies. I am not letting her out of my care. And I can call the director of this institution have you removed...

Macneil: And I can call the United States Attorney and have you arrested for obstructing a Federal investigation...

PAGE 35 (Four panels)

Panel One: View of Hope, sitting in her chair, coolly regarding the row between Macneil and Lehman.

Caption: I watch the two men muttering angrily in low tones for some time as each pretends to be my defender and protector.

Panel Two: Lehman, with an angry expression, finger jabbing at Macneil.

Caption: Lehman, a true psychiatrist, is committed to helping his patients achieve autonomy and rationality.

Caption: Though only as long as those patients use their rationality and autonomy to make the "right" choices, of course.

Panel Three: Macneil, standing with his arms crossed, presumably facing Lehman, scowling.

Caption: I think Macneil has an inkling of what I'm up to.

Caption: He should be horrified, but he's a bureaucrat under pressure to crack a case, so I think he'll override any scruples he has.

Panel Four: Hope, back in the same clothes she was wearing when she was detained by the police, leaning forward over a desk in someone's institutional office and signing a document on a clipboard.

Caption: In the end, Macneil must have been carrying the bigger stick, because they let me go.

PAGE 36 (Four panels)

Panel One: Side view of Macneil driving and Hope sitting in the passenger seat in the front of a government-issue black sedan. Neither is speaking.

Caption: Agent Macneil whisks me back to Dr. Xu's laboratory promptly.

Panel Two: View "from above" looking down at Hope, Macneil, and Xu, who are engaged in some sort of conversation.<p>

Caption: At the laboratory I ask Dr. Xu if he has enough "specimen" to fill an additional tube. He says that he does and arranges it.

Panel Three: Hope stands next to an empty tube, touching the side of it with her fingers. Xu is in the background.

Hope: ...and Dr. Xu, do you think it would be possible to get some of my scanning equipment sent here?

Xu: We could easily have it shipped overnight, Dr. Montclair? Have you somehow found a way to tune it to a brain other than your own?

Panel Four: Close up on Hope, Xu's P.O.V. She has turned her head and is facing out of the panel.

Hope: No.

Hope: But I thought it might be convenient to have the equipment here in case a different plan should happen along.

PAGE 37 (Four panels)

Panel One: Close-in view of Dr. Xu. He has a raised eyebrow.

Dr. Xu: A different plan?

Panel Two: Hope, turned around with the empty tube seen on the previous page now behind her.

Hope: You know, at least one licensed psychiatrist has determined that I might be "delusional" and "suffer from suicidal tendencies."

Hope: It might be a serious mistake to leave me alone in the laboratory.

Panel Three: Dr. Xu standing next to Macneil. Xu has a look about him of dawning enlightenment.

Dr. Xu: Of course, the risk of mistakes is part of the scientific enterprise.

Macneil: In law enforcement, we make mistakes all the time.

Panel Four: Hope standing in the same position as in Panel Two, except now with her arms crossed.

Hope: So I'm to be allowed to continue with my research, then?

PAGE 38 (Four panels)

Panel One: Hope letting herself into a motel room with a key. In one of her hands she's carrying a few shopping bags.

Caption: Macneil has me put up at an obscure motel after giving me the courtesy of a side trip for wine and Chinese take-out.

Panel Two: A FBI agent, wearing sunglasses, sitting behind the wheel of a government sedan, drinking take-out coffee.

Caption: He arranges for agents to be stationed outside to discourage certain parties from interfering in what I have planned.

Panel Three: Close-up of Hope's hand pouring some expensive wine into a plastic cup, next to some plates and take-out Chinese food containers.

Caption: The wine I picked up to enjoy by myself was way over my normal budget.

Panel Four: Hope, sitting in a chair inside her motel room, raising the plastic cup full of wine.

Caption: But what the hell. It's going to be a long time at best before I get to try something like this again.

Page 39 (Two panels)

Panel One: Two LABORATORY ASSISTANTS stand on ladders wrestling into place something that looks like a giant clamp around the upper portion of one of the empty tubes. Heavy cables run down off the clamp-like device and run out of the panel. Hope stands to one side directing them.

Caption: My equipment arrives the next day, and I spend most of that time directing its installation.

Caption: "Just a test run," I tell the personnel responsible. "Leave those ladders in place, so that I can undertake the final calibration."

Panel Two: ANDY, a youngish scientist in a white coat, stands at the base of one of the ladders, looking up at Hope, who's standing on the ladder and mostly out of the panel- — we see perhaps the bottom of her skirt and her legs.

Caption: One of the junior members of Xu's team, Andy I think his name is, is a bit forward.

Caption: Enjoy it while you can, buddy.

PAGE 40 (Three panels)

Panel One: Dr. Xu addressing a group of lab-coated scientists, with the small figure of Hope lingering in the background.

Caption: Dr. Xu calls a meeting in the late afternoon, mandatory for everyone in his lab, but not for me.

Panel Two: P.O.V from behind Hope. A group of lab-coated figures walking toward one of the laboratory's exits. One of them is Andy, and he's looking over his shoulder.

Caption: And so now I have facility to myself.

Panel Three: Hope setting up a video camera, pointing at the tube apparatus with the clamp.

Caption: Showtime.

PAGE 41 (Panels at artist's discretion)

Sequence of panels showing Hope undressing, mostly suggestive, via discarded clothing.

Caption: Let there be no doubt about who did this.

PAGE 42 (Single panel)

Single panel: Completely naked Hope easing herself off the top of the ladder into the goo-filled tube.

Caption: Here goes.

PAGE 43 (Single panel)

Single panel: Full view of Hope floating naked in the tube. Her eyes are closed, and her face composed in a calm expression.

Caption: It begins with a warm tingling feeling on my skin.

PAGE 44 (Four panels)

Panel One: View of Hope's face, the skin dissolved revealing muscles below.

Caption: And the skin is the first to go.

Panel Two: View Hope's lungs and heart underneath her ribcage, the skin, muscles, and breast tissue having completely dissolved.

Caption: I can feel everything going slack as my muscles go away.

Panel Three: View of Hope's skull, the eye sockets empty.

Caption: Normal external senses vanish altogether as the organs on which they depend are eaten up.

Panel Four: View of the bottom of the tube, in which rests a heap of bones.

Caption: I imagine that the major bones must be dropping away as the connective tissue that holds them together turns to liquid.

PAGE 45 (Four panels)

Panel One: View of the top of the tank, into which large bubbles are streaming.

Caption: Gasses are released as my lungs and viscera rupture.

Panel Two: Hope's skull floating obscured by something that looks like a cloud of reddish mist.

Caption: My blood spills out as major vessels are breached and lingers for a moment before it, too, is digested.

Panel Three: Hope's heart, opened as if sectioned in an anatomical drawing.

Caption: My heart finally melts.

Panel Four: Hope's skull, pieces of which are breaking away at the sutures, exposing brain beneath.

Caption: At last my hard skull is broken away.

PAGE 46 (Single panel)

Single Panel: Hope's brain and spinal cord, floating free in the tube.

Caption: Finally, liberation.

Caption: At least, that's how I think of it if I want to put a positive spin on matters.

PAGE 47 (Four panels)

Panel One: View of Hope's nude body drifting in a dark space. She has a blissful expression, and her body language is completely relaxed.

Caption: For a while I drift in a sort of happy daze. It feels for all the world like post-coital bliss.

Caption: Then, as if they are pushing themselves in, words enter my consciousness.

Panel Two: View of Dr. Xu, typing into the keyboard. We see his face full on, and many other lab-coated scientists in the background. Xu looks tense.

Caption: "Dr. Montclair? Are you there? Are we reaching you?"

Panel Three: Close-up of a screen that Dr. Xu can see. On it are printed out the words YES...I CAN HEAR YOU, DR. XU... AND I AM FINE.

Panel Four: Dr. Xu in the same position as we saw him in Panel Two, except that he is now sitting back and looking somewhat relaxed.

Caption: "We are glad to hear it, Dr. Montclair."

PAGE 48 (Four panels)

Panel One: Close-up on Hope's brain floating in the tube.

Caption: Soon the blissful feeling ends and I have the strong experience of...thinking a lot.

Panel Two: View of Hope as an eight year-old girl, riding a bicycle on a quiet suburban street.

Caption: Or perhaps I should say that I begin very actively remembering. I begin with the experience of fast-forwarding through my childhood...

Panel Three: Hope as an adolescent, nicely dressed, holding a trophy and smiling, posing for a picture.

Caption: I linger for a while over the proud moment of winning my first big science prize in high school.

Panel Four: A screen which people outside the tube could read. The text on the screen is I RECALL MEETING MY FUTURE ADVISOR FOR THE FIRST TIME WHEN HE IS TEACHING A GRADUATE SEMINAR...I ASK A QUESTION THAT HE CANNOT ANSWER AND HE IS FLUSTERED...

Caption: I try to diligently communicate all this information to the laboratory.

PAGE 49 (Single panel)

Single panel: Montage of Hope about the same age she is in the main narration but otherwise the same character. Hope is having sex with someone. The details are mostly left to the artist's discretion, save for (1) it's obviously pretty hot sex and (2) it's with someone other than Brian Butler.

Caption: Well, perhaps I don't report on all memories.

Caption: Some might be a little too personal, however enjoyable they are to relive.

PAGE 50 (Four panels)

Panel One: Reprise of a panel of Hope in the MRI machine.

Caption: When we get up to the point in my life when I begin work on direct neural communication, everything slows down dramatically. I begin living out every detail very vividly.

Panel Two: Abstract representation of neurons firing.

Caption: At the same time as this goes on I have a weird double consciousness of my own thoughts being somehow correlated with my own neural processes.

Panel Three: Representation of Hope as a luminous outline, floating through space. Her legs are bent and apart, and she has a hand in between her legs, masturbating.

Caption: This should be agonizingly dull, but I seem to get a flow of pleasure from the act of concentrating on details.

Caption: The harder I concentrate, the more intense the sensation.

Panel Four: Two graduate-student types, peering down at the monitor reading Hope's verbal reports. They appear to be sniggering to one another.

Caption: I imagine some of my reports must make for interesting reading.

Graduate Student #1: "The pleasure is so intense.."

Graduate Student #2: Woo!

PAGE 51 (Four panels)

Panel One: Abstract representation of a nude Hope wandering with a blissful expression among the terms of an equation from neuroscience (take one from here <http://www.genesis-sim.org/BABEL/gum-tutorials/cornelis/doc/html/node11.html>)

Caption: I am in the act of pouring over past knowledge when I feel a puzzling message come through from Dr. Xu. "What do you mean we must boost the signal?"

Panel Two: View of a communications screen through which has two lines of dialog: MONTCLAIR: I DON'T UNDERSTAND. I DIDN'T TRANSMIT THAT and XU: IT SHOWED UP RIGHT HERE ON MY SCREEN.

Panel Three: View of Hope's head, set in an abstract space, bent forward, brow furrowed in concentration.

Caption: I focus on transmitting very clearly "No memory of any such message. Must just be a glitch."

Panel Four: Dr. Xu, bent over his keyboard, typing, looking intent.

Caption: "Please try to stay focused, Dr. Montclair," they transmit back. "This is of the highest importance."

PAGE 52 (Four panels)

Panel One: A flashback P.O.V. panel, Hope looking down at her bare legs and feet as she is about to insert herself into the tube full of gel in Dr. Xu's laboratory.

Caption: My life's recapitulation proceeds up to the point of my...transformation. And then things start to get a little weird.

Panel Two: Another P.O.V., but this one of Amy looking down at her breasts as she's cupping her hands under them on Page 1, Panel Four. Note that it is important to match the swimsuit design here with what the reader would have seen on that page to make visual identification possible.

Caption: I have a strange...experience?...dream?...of being a teenage girl and feeling satisfied and happy with my...development. I'm about to go swimming in a lake on a summer's day.

Panel Three: Another P.O.V., that of Amy as a swimmer, her arms cutting through the water in front of her, a wooded shore visible in the distance.

Caption: I duly report my experience to my handlers. They ask whether I think it is an hallucination. I suppose it could be one, inspired by my reading in Amy Ninenger's dossier how she came to her...transformation.

Caption: It doesn't feel like an hallucination. It feels very real.

Panel Four: A chaos of bubbles representing what was in Amy's field of vision at the moment she was pulled under.

Caption: The experience is interrupted by Dr. Xu's transmission that they have received that phantom line "We must boost the signal" again.

PAGE 53 (Two panels)

Panel One: Another P.O.V., this time one from a (much younger) Faith Quek. A middle-aged woman, who could be Faith's mother, is standing in a middle-class kitchen and obviously scolding the viewer.

Caption: Things get stranger when I have the experience of my "mother" scolding me in Cantonese for not being diligent enough about doing my homework.

Caption: This woman is not my mother.

Caption: And I don't speak Cantonese.

Panel Two: Dr. Xu and another middle-aged Asian scientist type (details at the artist's discretion) look down at the screen, fascinated.

Caption: But I seem to understand what she is saying. I provide transliterations and translations.

Caption: Dr. Xu and his staff confirm for me that they are accurate and meaningful.

PAGE 54 (Single panel)

Single panel: Another P.O.V., this one of Stanley (from above) holding his hand and looking back at the view in horror and pain, while holding his hand as if it has been injured. The image should be blurred, as if looking through a grease-smeared window.

Caption: Another scene plays out for me, one that begins in shock and terror, then melts into acquiescence.

Caption: I transmit a request to have Special Agent Macneil try to find out what the last thing Grace Bluestone's boyfriend said to her before her...incident.

Caption: The answer comes back "Lenin's in Poland."

Caption: That wasn't in the dossier.

PAGE 55 (Four panels)

Panel One: Extreme close-up view of Hope's brain floating in the tube.

Caption: And it begins to dawn on me what might be meant by "We must boost the signal," itself a form of leaking signal...

Panel Two: Portraits of the four women, Amy, Faith, Grace, and Hope, arranged in a network diagram.

Caption: This gel...it is reading us like books...then transmitting across, which is how I can have the subjective experiences of other women.

Panel Three: Hope in the laboratory, holding the tablet on which she was reading the dossiers of the dissolved women, her eyes closed and rubbing one of her temples, as if she has a passing bit of headache.

Caption: And I begin to wonder...was I receiving the "signal" even before "deciding" to undergo my present...change?

Panel Four: Hope and Brian back in their little kitchen, in the middle of an angry argument.

Caption: Were all the compelling "arguments" I had for doing what I'm doing just...rationalizations floating atop some deeper motive?

PAGE 56 (Four panels)

Panel One: Hope, floating in the gel, eyes closed, just before her flesh begins dissolving.

Caption: Rationalizations or no, I have been lured in.

Panel Two: View from the same angle and position, now showing just Hope's exposed brain and spinal cord.

Caption: Now the gel has read a brain that knows as much as any human brain could know about how human brains work...

Panel Three: A view of the globe, showing abstract lines running from point to point all over it, indicating lines of transmission and communication.

Caption: ...and I'll bet that will boost the signal tremendously.

Panel Four: Dr. Xu, looking exhausted and deathly pale, typing into the keyboard.

Caption: Dr. Xu figures out what's going on at about the same time I do.

Caption: He begins transmitting that he's dreadfully sorry, but that...

PANEL 57 (Single panel)

Single panel: View from a high angle, looking down through the tube that once contained Hope's brain. The tube is now empty, save for a little cluster of bubbles. Beyond the tube, and partly obscured by it, are Xu, Macneil, and a couple of other scientists, looking up horrified at the cluster.

Caption: That's all right, Dr. Xu. Save yourself the trouble of going for the nitric acid.

Caption: My role here is done, and now I'm just so much tasty protein.

Caption: Pardon the gel while it finishes making a meal of me.

PAGE 58 (Single panel)

Single panel. A row of tubes in the lab, the ones which, at minimum, contained the brains of Amy, Faith, and Grace, all now similarly empty save for a cluster of bubbles.

Caption: It is too late for everyone, gentlemen.

Caption: A new kind of mind is taking over.

PAGE 59 (Three panels)

Panels One through Three: Three examples of women, all of clearly different ethnicities, but all naked, one lowering herself down a well, one descending headfirst into a manhole, and third seen from behind walking out into the sea. The captions are to be distributed among the panels according to artist discretion.

Caption: All over the world they will come to us, drawn by pleasure to become our food.

Caption: We have boosted the signal, and it will grow ever stronger.

Caption: The end.